

Sermon (#7)

Sunday 16th September 2018. Gospel Reading: Mark 8:27 - end.

The Inescapable Question. (1592 words)

***May all I say and all we think be in harmony with you, God within, God beyond,
God of all wisdom.***

Amen.

Please be seated...

There's a story about the famous Florentine sculptor Michelangelo. The story goes that he was once asked 'how he went about carving a head of Christ. He replied that he saw the head of Christ already existing in the stone and it was (simply) a matter of chipping away the unwanted material'¹. For Michelangelo, the pre-existing reality of his subject was liberated by removing the excess material; he found ***his*** Christ living within the heart of the marble.

In today's gospel reading we hear Jesus ask his disciples probably the most important and challenging question they'd ever been asked. He starts by asking "who do people say that I am?" and he's told the gossip, the rumours and the wild speculation...John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. And then, preceded by what William Barclay calls 'a breathless silence'² he turns to them again and asks

¹ Sproxton, V. (1971) *Teilhard de Chardin*. London: SCM Press Ltd.

² Barclay, W. (1975) *The Daily Study Bible: Revised Edition*. Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press.

“but who do you say that I am?” I can only imagine how stunned they must have been by this question, how unprepared they must have been to answer it at that moment, and only Peter rose to the challenge.

Jesus’ question takes us into the realms of Christology, that branch of Christian theology concerned with the nature and person of Jesus and how he relates to our understanding of God. It isn’t just a question asked of the twelve, it echoes throughout history and comes to rest within each and every one of us. It’s a critical question for two reasons. Firstly, to quote the American New Testament Scholar and theologian Marcus Borg, ‘how we see Jesus affects how we see Christianity – it shapes what we think the Christian life is most centrally about’³. Secondly, his question forces us to think about Jesus for ourselves and not just blindly accept what we’re told by others. Whether we like it or not, each of us has to make our own response, each one of us has to answer the question for ourselves...who do *‘I’* say that Jesus is? Who do *‘you’* say that Jesus is? Note the question carefully, it’s not asking ‘who does the church say that I am?’, or ‘who does Christian tradition say that I am?’, or ‘who do the creeds say that I am?’ Jesus is asking each one of us to answer his question for ourselves, to come to our own conclusion. This resonates with Jesus telling us to ‘enter through the narrow gate’...‘enter through the narrow gate’, he says, ‘for the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it’⁴. For me, one aspect of this teaching is that a narrow gate only has just enough space for **one** person to get through it. Although we can travel

³ Borg, M. J. (2006) *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. New York: HarperOne.

⁴ Matthew 7:13-14

alongside others, ultimately we have to pass through the narrow gate alone, we have to make the transformative interior journey alone, and we have to answer the big questions about God and Jesus for ourselves. The wide gate and the easy road lead us to do as we're told and to think as we're told to think. But the narrow gate and the hard road forces us to think for ourselves.

Now I'll be honest with you...I've always had a bit of a problem with Jesus that I don't have with God. You might think it would be the other way around, but I'm quite happy to accept the unknowability of God and to live within the mystery of God. But Jesus was someone who lived at a particular time and place; a figure from history who is still crucially important today. Was he simply a human being like me, like you? Was he God, or a combination of the two, or a Jewish Rabbi, or an enlightened wisdom teacher?

Laurence Freeman, the Catholic priest, Benedictine monk and director of the World Community for Christian Meditation, suggests that this question calls us 'deeper into the mystery of God'⁵, and he goes on to say that we can only offer our response after 'listening more attentively to it'⁶. We have to turn our attention away from ourselves, let go of our self-absorbed preoccupations, and listen deeply to the question. Perhaps more importantly, we have to turn to the questioner and be open, attentive and fully present to him. We have to listen carefully to his story and be receptive to all that he has been, is, and will be in order to resonate with the truth of

⁵ Freeman, L. (2000) *Jesus the Teacher Within*. London: Continuum.

⁶ Ibid

who he is. There is a tension inherent within his question, the tension between certainty and doubt, between belief and unbelief⁷, and it's this tension that drives us to search; it is the not really knowing that compels us to explore the question more deeply.

We hear that Peter's answer to the question was that Jesus is the Messiah⁸. Others have maintained that Jesus is God, or the Lamb of God⁹, or the Son of God¹⁰, or true God from true God¹¹, or the good shepherd¹², or the chief shepherd¹³, or the Light of the World¹⁴, or the morning star¹⁵, or the Bread of Life¹⁶, or the Christ¹⁷. For me, all of these responses hold truth within them, but of course they're not meant to be literalised. Essentially they're all examples of the rich metaphorical language that illuminates our Christological understanding. And maybe, at the end of the day, perhaps all we can ever do is answer Jesus' question through the use of metaphor.

There are, of course, people who would be very happy to tell what you should think and how you should respond to this question. But I'm not going to present you with a definitive answer. Partly because I don't have a definitive answer, but also because each of us has no choice but to make our own response into which we will inevitably

⁷ Mark 9:24 ('I believe; help my unbelief')

⁸ Mark 8:29

⁹ John 1:29

¹⁰ Luke 1:35

¹¹ The Nicene Creed

¹² John 10:11;14

¹³ 1 Peter 5:4

¹⁴ John 8:12

¹⁵ Revelation 22:16

¹⁶ John 6:35

¹⁷ Matthew 16:20

project our own insights, understandings, hopes and longings. But I would like to share with you three responses reflecting different insights.

Firstly, Laurence Freeman, the aforementioned director of the World Community for Christian Meditation. He concludes his book 'Jesus the Teacher Within' with a direct response to Jesus' question that begins with an acknowledgment that, by ourselves, we don't, and maybe can't, know the answer. He says to Jesus...' *You* must help me to know who you are. But I say that you, Jesus, are the humility, the humanity of God'¹⁸.

Secondly, the French Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. With a significance that sadly we don't have time to explore now, he guides us from the historical Jesus, and the debates concerning his human and divine natures, towards the eternal and Cosmic Christ, who is 'the centre at which all things meet and which stretches out over all things so as to draw them back into itself...the centre toward which all things are moving'¹⁹. This, we're told in Colossians, is the Christ who existed 'before anything was created' and who 'holds all things in unity'²⁰.

And finally, a personal reflection. My response to Jesus' question remains tentative, a work in progress you might say. I could have emphasised his humanity, his wisdom, his compassion, or his importance as an enlightened non-dual teacher and

¹⁸ Freeman, L. (2000) *Jesus the Teacher Within*. London: Continuum.

¹⁹ Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1961) *Hymn of the Universe*.

²⁰ Colossians 1:17 (Jerusalem Bible)

guide. But all things considered, I think I'd respond to his question with reference to the notion of 'thin places'. Experiencing locations or people as 'thin places' has its origins in Celtic spirituality. The theory goes that the physical world and the eternal world are only three feet apart, and separated by a veil. But in thin places the distance separating this world from the eternal is even smaller and the veil becomes permeable. Such places, or people, expand our consciousness, reveal the elusive truth of our unity with creation, and furnish us with a foretaste of our union with the timeless mystery of God. They help us to change, to see more clearly, to feel and connect more deeply, and to transcend the boundaries of time and space. So, when Jesus asks me "who do you say that I am?" my response might be this...you Lord are the ultimate thin place. Within you there is no veil, there is no separation between divinity and humanity, between the physical and the eternal. You are so completely open to the indwelling of the creator that you radiate God's light²¹ in the world. **In** you I see Truth and **through** you I discover the way to it.

So, when Jesus asks each of us 'who do you say that I am?' our responses may differ. But, like Michelangelo's sculpture, our answer to his inescapable question exists within us. The reality of who Jesus is lives within the cave of our hearts and is liberated when we chip away the excess material and set it free within us.

Amen

²¹ | John 1:5