



Parish of Finchampstead and California

week 2 – from 1 March 2015

LENT WELL SPENT ... in the Name of Jesus: Messiah

Gospel reading – Mark 8:27-38 (NRSVA)

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Context

This pivotal incident in Mark's Gospel comes between Jesus' healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and the Transfiguration (9:2-8). The healing takes place in two stages: initially the man can see people who *look like trees walking around*. Only after Jesus' second touch does he *see everything clearly*. This is likely to be Mark's way of saying that Peter's declaration of faith in Jesus as Messiah is incomplete without the further revelation of the Transfiguration.

In fact Peter's *understanding* remains incomplete throughout - he hits on this description of Jesus' identity which, in Mark's account, Jesus does not deny, but is then rebuked in the sharpest terms for refusing to accept the implications Jesus draws from his recognition as Messiah.

At his interrogation before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:55-64; Matthew 26:59-66), Jesus accepts the description of Messiah and this may have added fuel to the authorities' determination to kill him. But Jesus never claims the title Messiah directly for himself and, as in today's passage, clearly prefers *Son of Man* as self-identification (we'll be looking further at this title in week 5).

One reason, and the likely reason for Jesus' command of silence to his disciples, is that his ideas about Messiahship were radically different from popular Jewish expectations which, in a simplified form masking much diversity, were for a *political* or *military* Messiah wielding temporal power, specifically to throw off the Roman yoke.

This is not a specifically Old Testament idea though the Hebrew word translated Messiah means *anointed one*. It's applied in the OT to priests (eg Exodus 28:41) and prophets (eg 1 Kings 19:16) but above all to King David and his descendents whose *kingdom shall endure for ever* (2 Samuel 7:16). In spite of the exile to Babylon and occupation by Greece and Rome, the hope of a powerful king's return seems, if anything, to have strengthened by the time of Jesus.

But the limited Gospel evidence hardly explains why the first Christians saw the resurrection as clear proof that Jesus was the Messiah (= greek Christos = Christ). Paul never feels obliged to argue for or explain the radical reinterpretation of Jewish messianic ideas. This reinterpretation which was current within 20 years of that event (see 1 Thessalonians 1.3) was about the inauguration of God's kingdom, not a Jewish one, and underlay Paul's frequent use of *Christ* both in conjunction with *Jesus* and on its own.

Questions on the Bible reading and background

- 1 What caused Peter to identify Jesus as Messiah?
- 2 Why did Jesus instruct the disciples to keep silent?
- 3 Given the absence of Biblical warrant or Jewish tradition linking Messiah with suffering and death, in what ways was Peter's reaction to Jesus understandable?
- 4 But why did Jesus react so strongly? How does this fit in with last week's reflections on Jesus' confrontation with the real Satan?
- 5 Given the difficulty they had over grasping Jesus' true identity, how likely is it that the crowd would have accepted the personal implications of following Jesus?
- 6 To what extent was Jesus' decision to give the hard public teaching of v34-38 the result of the crowd's misconceptions of who he was, as reported by the disciples in v28? How was this message of Jesus different from what they might have expected from John the Baptist or Elijah?
- 7 Why did the earliest Christians including Paul take it for granted that Jesus was God's Messiah, in spite of the major reorientation of previous Jewish ideas that this entailed?

Questions about ourselves

- 8 Who do we say that Jesus is? How would we describe him to someone of another faith? Where does our idea of Messiah fit into this?
- 9 How do we react to aspects of the Christian faith that we find difficult to agree with? Are we open and responsive to God's rebuke when it's needed? What are the ways in which we might hear it?
- 10 When are we most likely to privilege worldly wisdom over God's wisdom?
- 11 We'll be thinking about Jesus as *Suffering Servant* during Holy Week. But how do we respond to the suffering that Jesus perceived he had to experience? Why was it necessary?
- 12 What are we denying ourselves (not in the Lenten sense of temporary abstinence but in a whole-life sense) to follow Jesus? And what does it mean for us to take up our cross?

Concluding Comments

As we continue on this series of names or titles of Jesus, we will discover lots of overlapping ideas. For example in the High Priest's accusing question, he links *Messiah* with *Son of God* (week 1). Jesus' reply, as in today's reading, refers to *Son of Man*. *Messiah* is also closely linked with *Son of David* which we will consider next week.

But there are also many familiar names that we won't cover explicitly. The words of this well-known hymn may be a helpful prayer:

There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One.

Jesus, my Redeemer,
Name above all names,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
O for sinners slain.

*Thank you, O my Father,
For giving us your Son,
And leaving your Spirit
Till the work on earth is done.*

When I stand in glory,
I will see his face,
And there I'll serve my God for ever,
In that Holy place.

Lent Lecture - Tuesday 3 March

Anointed Saviour, Anointed People - Rev'd Canon **Andrew Marsden** will be reflecting further on this week's theme of Jesus as Messiah. Andrew is Vicar of St Sebastian's Church Wokingham, a long-term member of Bishop's Council in the Diocese of Oxford and Adviser on Spiritual Transformation to the Bishop of Reading. He is a member of the editorial group for Grove booklets Ethics series and regularly writes Bible study notes for Scripture Union.

Tea and coffee will be available in St James' Church Centre from 7.45 and the Lecture will start in the hall at 8.

Other Lent Activities

Monday morning 9-10 in Church - Lent prayer (silent prayer - come and go as you please).

Monday afternoon 2-3 (SJCC) - an opportunity to explore the weekly theme in more depth.