

Sunday 28 February 2021 - Lent 2

Sermon Notes

Today's Bible Reading - Mark 8:27-38

- Well-known as the pivot for the two halves of Mark's description of Jesus' ministry - when Peter stumbles on his identity as the Messiah, but fails to understand the sort of Messiah Jesus will be
- He can't accept that this Messiah will suffer and die, but Jesus knows. So he calls the crowd to him and explains to everyone that there is a high cost to pay if they want to be his followers
- In different ways there are four things missing from today's reading

The missing miracle

- Immediately before this incident Mark gives the unique account of the restoration of a blind man's sight - the one where sight only returns partially at first, then fully
- Mark 8:22-26. They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'
- This healing prefigures our reading - in other words Peter's initial understanding is partial only, not complete - even down to Jesus' instruction to keep silent

Jesus' missing words to Peter

- In Matthew Jesus responds to Peter's initial declaration with a strong commendation of Peter: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' (16:17-19)
- He goes on to reprimand Peter in just the same way as Mark, but Matthew's text gives Peter the priority among the apostles after Jesus' ascension that we know he enjoyed

Jesus' missing words about himself

- Jesus does not answer his own question 'Who am I?' about himself, at least not explicitly
- Note the contrast between this and the series of bold I AM statements he makes in John's Gospel (the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine etc), though these are all metaphors not titles

- Implicitly he seems to accept Peter's statement he qualifies it in two important ways
- If he is the Messiah, the Christ, he is to be a secret Messiah (probably to avoid the notoriety and consequent attention of the authorities once the word got round)
- And if he is the Messiah, he needs to redefine what that means - no glorious military campaign against the Romans but suffering, rejection, death. No wonder Peter is confused: his eyes are not yet fully open

The missing question to us

- Of course there is no way within the literary conventions of Gospel-writing for Jesus to speak directly to his readers or hearers 2000 years later
- But his question to the disciples is as relevant to us as to them - 'Who do you say that I am?'
- We, now, must answer that question - and do so in two ways
- First we must answer it as individuals. If a friend asked us 'Who is Jesus?', what would we say? Would we use the familiar titles - Messiah/Christ, Son of God, Saviour of the world etc (each of which would need explaining) - or would we try and explain what Jesus means to us: our relationship with him?
- Let's, each of us, ask ourselves that question today, and so make explicit what we normally regard as implicit. Interestingly I think most of us would come up with a description very different from those we find in the church's historic creeds - not because what they say is untrue, but because they come from church councils, not from the hearts of individual believers
- Secondly we must answer it as members of our church community
- Let's not play down the effect that the pandemic has had on our life together
- And yet my sense is that most people are holding on to their faith and looking forward to returning to worshipping together and socialising together. We are no less the body of Christ because we are currently dispersed to our own homes
- Even when apart, we remain together through our common bond Jesus
- Together but apart we still have to answer the question 'Who do you say that I am?'
- And part of our response together is not through words but by our actions, especially the mutual support we continue to offer one another, by praying for one another, by sharing our burdens
- One of these burdens is our serious financial position and I hope our response together will demonstrate just how determined we are to preserve the future God has in store for us - together
- But the question 'Who do we say together that Jesus is?' is much wider than that and goes to the heart of our faith
- And if we answer, following Thomas' example (John 20:28), 'Our Lord and our God', everything, absolutely everything, falls into place