

Who do you say I am?

A sermon on Mark 8:27-38 by Adam Couchman, 12 September 2021

“Who do you say I am?”

This question is central to Mark’s account of the gospel. In fact, it is central to the Christian faith. It is the question that consumed the debates of the ecumenical councils – Who do we say Jesus is? Divine? Human? Both? It is the dominant theme of the creeds that emerged from those councils and which is confessed aloud in churches across the world – “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.” It is also central to the responses Christians make to the interrogation questions when they are baptised.

Our answer to this question is central to who we are as God’s people.

As far as Mark is concerned, this is an open secret. He gives his audience the answer to the question right at the very beginning. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1).

There it is. That’s the answer. Remember, too, that “Christ” is not Jesus’ surname; it’s a title. It means “Anointed One.” In the Greek, it’s Christos. In the Hebrew, it’s Messiah.

The way Mark tells the story is very similar to superhero movies today. We, the audience, are given the secret identity of the main character right from the beginning; Superman is Clark Kent, Batman is Bruce Wayne, Spiderman is Peter Parker. For the rest of the story we watch in wonder and amazement as people are completely baffled when Clark Kent takes off his glasses, puts on a different outfit, and no one knows who he is anymore!

The question that is going to be asked and asked again and again throughout the rest of the account of the gospel is answered right at the very beginning. As we read through the gospel, or as was most likely originally intended, as the gospel is performed before an audience, we are meant to keep this answer in mind. We know the answer, but the characters in the story don’t. Except for a few. And who those characters are surprises us completely.

I want you to imagine yourself hearing the story of Jesus for the first time. You might be a brand new Christian and you’ve heard enough of the story to make your own confession of faith in Jesus, but you’re just about to hear Mark’s account of the gospel for the first time. He starts by telling you that Jesus is the Son of God. Mark doesn’t mess around with accounts of Jesus’ genealogy or his birth. He just wants to show that Jesus is the Son of God, and so he gets straight into it. The first character to enter the stage is John the Baptist. Since I’m preaching at a Baptist church it makes sense that he gains a prominent place here.

Central to the story of Jesus’ baptism is the confession of who Jesus is... and this comes from “a voice from heaven.” (1:11). The voice confirms what we’ve already been told. It speaks directly to Jesus and says to him; “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (1:11)

We now know that God knows, and Jesus knows, what Mark has already told us—that Jesus is the Son of God.

We move on and Jesus calls his first disciples; Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. Here we might expect at least one of them to say something. But no... they are silent. They follow Jesus but we'll have to wait to find out if they know who he really is.

We travel to Capernaum where Jesus teaches in the synagogue. Perhaps one of the religious leaders will identify him? Surely they will recognise Jesus for who he really is? Who would you expect to be the first character in the story to clearly, confidently, and accurately identify Jesus for who he really is?

A disciple? A religious leader? Perhaps a family member of Jesus?

No... it's a man with an unclean spirit.

"I know who you are, the Holy One of God!" (1:24)

Astounding! As is Jesus' response; he silences him??? He exorcises the demon, tells him to be quiet, and everyone around is amazed.

"What is this?" (1:27) they ask.

Jesus' fame spreads across the country... but do people really know who he is?

The amazement from those who watch Jesus continues throughout the story. When Jesus tells a paralysed man that his sins are forgiven the scribes sitting nearby ask "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7). Later, when he teaches in his hometown, the locals cannot get beyond the fact that he grew up down the street with Mary as his mother. "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" (6:2).

Meanwhile, it's the demons who keep blurting out the secret; that answer that was given to us right at the beginning but so many people are yet to figure out.

Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" (3:11)

How about the man from Gerasenes, possessed by a legion of demons, living among the tombs, unable to be restrained? He sees Jesus, runs, bows before him, and shouts out "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (5:7) What happens when the people from town find out that the local weirdo has been cured? They come and tell Jesus to go away (5:17).

How about the disciples? Surely the people that are closest to Jesus, spending every day with him, watching his every move, and hearing every word of his teaching; surely, they'll know who he is?

Sadly, they don't get it either. When Jesus was sleeping in the boat in the midst of the storm and the disciples wake him up to save them, not even the calming of the storm could reveal to them the answer to this question. They're left wondering; "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41) All the way up to the passage where Peter finally makes his confession the disciples' actions lead Jesus to ask them "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21)

Finally, in the middle of chapter 8 Jesus asks the disciples the question “Who do people say that I am?” (8:27) It’s an indirect way of asking them how they would answer the question. Their answer reveals that there is probably still debate amongst his own followers – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets? Surely, one of us has got to be right?

Then the question is changed. This second time it’s asked it is direct and to the point. “But who do you say that I am?”

We who’ve been listening since the beginning of the gospel and watching in amazement as demon-possessed people get this information straight away, the religious elite refuse to believe it, and the disciples are completely confused by what is happening right in front of them; finally, we hear the answer to this question from one of his closest followers. Peter steps up and responds

“You are the Messiah” (8:29)

There’s a sense of relief that comes from hearing Peter say these words. Finally, someone gets it. But don’t let that relief fool you.

The response triggers a turning point in the gospel for where our attention is focused. Up until this point it’s been upon “Who is Jesus?” Now it turns to “What has he come here to do?” The answer? The cross.

Mark tells us that Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be killed, and after three days rise again. Interestingly, whilst the disciples are ordered to keep his identity a secret, his destiny is discussed openly with anyone who’ll listen.

For Peter, the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah, it’s all too much to bear. He cannot reconcile that the Son of God’s destiny would be suffering and death. Jesus turns his back on Peter, looks at the other disciples, and openly rebukes Peter.

“Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (8:33)

He moves on immediately, calling together the crowd and the disciples. The revelation of coming attractions continues.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (8:34)

The Son of God, the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, turns to face his destiny and then calls upon his followers to come with him in his journey towards Calvary. Jesus wants his disciples to immediately connect their confession of who Jesus is with radical discipleship that follows him regardless of the cost.

Immediately following on from Peter’s confession comes Mark’s account of the Mount of Transfiguration. It’s important because it acts like a bookend to the events that happened at the very beginning; specifically, the baptism of Jesus. The voice from heaven that we heard way back at the start of the gospel returns with a very similar message to the one that it brought before. There is one important difference this time, though. Before, when Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan river, the voice spoke directly to him. It confirmed his

identity; the identity that Mark had revealed right from the outset. “You are my Son.” Now, on top of the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice addresses the three disciples who journeyed up with Jesus; Peter, James and John. It confirms Peter’s confession from a week ago; “This is my Son, the Beloved” (9:7)

But like the call to radical discipleship that followed on from the confession of Jesus as Messiah, the voice gives instruction of what to do now; “Listen to him!”

Peter may have been the first to confess the true identity of Jesus but he certainly was not the last. We join with Christians throughout the ages who confess that “Jesus is Lord!” At baptism, the creed becomes our confession – “I believe... in Jesus Christ, [God’s] only Son, our Lord.” When we recite the creed in our liturgy, we reaffirm our faith together with all Christians who have made this confession the central expression of our faith – “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.” It all connects back in historic continuity to Peter’s confession before Jesus that day; “You are the Messiah!”

But in confessing the same confession we must respond to the same instruction. If we want to be his followers, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. We must hear the voice from heaven and “listen to him.”

There is no other way.

I love the way Mark tells the story of Jesus. He doesn’t mess about with details, or spend time telling you about Jesus’ great, great, great, grandmother. He just gets straight into it. “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Our reading today is the focal point of this confession. “You are the Messiah!” But that confession demands discipleship – “Take up your cross and follow me.”

I want to suggest to you that Mark demands of his listeners a response like this more than any other; particularly if you read it in its shortest version. Now, if you’ve read Mark all the way through you may have noticed that the final chapter, Mark 16, has some headings; “The Shorter Ending of Mark” and “The Longer Ending of Mark.” The reality is we don’t have the original version of any of the biblical books. What we have are copies of copies of copies. Amongst all these copies there are some differences. Some small. Some big. This is one of the bigger ones. Scholars analyse, discuss, and debate the versions that we have available. The reality is we’re left with a significant question and the current response of those publishing translations of the texts is to include the Shorter and Longer ending. But the reality is the earliest versions of the Gospel according to Mark do not include either one. It just stops. Abruptly.

And it’s a really uncomfortable ending.

But there’s a point to it. Mark is a story-teller. It’s dramatic. And he knows that the point is not to just give all the details of Jesus life in one complete text but to elicit a faith-based response from his audience. Remember, the gospel is written to show that Jesus is the Son of God and to call upon his followers to respond to that by taking up their cross and following Jesus. It’s a call to radical discipleship. A call to listen to Jesus. A call to following him regardless of the cost. To believe he is the Son of God and then do what he says, regardless of how far down the road you can see.

As a conclusion to tonight's sermon I'm going to read the shortest ending of Mark's gospel but as I do I want you to try and imagine that you're hearing it for the first time. Try and put aside all of the other endings you know from the other gospels; Matthew's Great Commission, Luke's Road to Emmaus, and John's fishing restoration scene. Just try and imagine that you've just heard the story of Jesus for the first time. You've heard that he is the Son of God and that he calls all of his followers to take up their cross and follow him. You've heard that Jesus has risen from the dead, but you don't have any proof – how could you? By now he's ascended and risen into heaven. In this shortest of the endings, there is very little reference to the risen Jesus. In fact, he doesn't even make an appearance, he's only referred to by an angel. No one, not even Mary Magdalene sees him. No one gets to see the risen Jesus, they're left to either believe it or reject it.

Just like us.

The disciples are left to make a choice. We are left to make a choice. How are they going to answer this question? How are you going to answer this question?

“Who do you say I am?”

Read Mark 16:1-8