

A Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 11

Have you ever watched the TV programme, 'Who do you think you are?' In each episode, a celebrity goes on a voyage of discovery, learning more about their family tree. It's rarely without drama or pathos, a real roller-coaster of human emotions as the celebrity discovers long-lost family history. Through the celebrity's journey into the past, you also get a fascinating insight into the lives of previous generations.

We could write a good drama sketch with today's Gospel reading (Matthew 16: 13 – 20), making it an episode of 'Who do you think you are?' with Jesus as the focus. *Except*, that Jesus knows exactly who he is and where he has come from. It's the disciples who need to answer the question, 'Who do you think Jesus is?'

Imagine the opening captions - we find Jesus and his disciples in the district of Caesarea Philippi. This isn't the fine city of Caesarea built by Herod the Great on the shores of the Mediterranean. It was a town, rebuilt by Herod's son Philip, who named it after the emperor Tiberius Caesar and himself. Not known for their self-deprecation the Herod family!

Caesarea Philippi lay just to the north of the Sea of Galilee and near the slopes of Mount Hermon. The area was predominantly pagan, dominated by the Roman occupying forces. So, in a way it was both an unexpected, yet fitting place for Jesus' true identity to be proclaimed. In last week's Gospel reading during Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, we start to realize that his mission on earth was broader than just for his own people. He had come as Saviour for the whole world.

'Who do people say that I am?' asks Jesus.

The disciples aren't sure, so they try out some answers.

They respond with some of the speculations that were doing the rounds: some people claimed that he was John the Baptist, resurrected from the dead after his murder by Herod Antipas. Others suggested that Jesus may in fact be Elijah, whose return was expected to herald the imminent coming of the Messiah. Still others claimed that he may be Jeremiah or one of the other great prophets returned to the people of God.

It is interesting to note, that the people in general did not seem to think that Jesus himself was on a par with these 'greats' of their history. Perhaps that is a very common human trait – we look to the leaders of the past through rose-tinted lenses, forgetting their faults and lionizing their triumphs, undervaluing the leaders of our own time when compared with those of the past.

Then Jesus sharpens the question: 'What about you? Who do *you* say that I am?'

It was a moment of truth, a very special moment in his disciples' relationship with their friend and teacher. Simon speaks up and proclaims: "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is a huge step forward for Simon and his companions. They have come to understand that Jesus is not just another rabbi, not just another prophet, but is in fact the long-awaited Messiah and Saviour King who would deliver Israel. Deliver the people of God not just from the occupying Roman forces but from every other ignominy that the people of God had suffered.

It is step change in their relationship with him. They are now starting to understand the true identity and mission of the man that they had followed when he called them.

Then the focus shifts immediately to Simon. Jesus praises him for his insightful declaration, but then points out that Simon's declaration is a result of divine inspiration. A supernatural unveiling to Simon of a scriptural mystery. But this change in relationship, this spiritual recognition of Jesus' identity

needs to be marked. Simon has been transformed by this new knowledge. This new certainty of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Jesus tells Simon that from now on he is to be called 'Peter', his rock on which the church will be built. Simon Peter is then given spiritual power and authority - the "keys of the Kingdom", all that he will need to help spread the message about the declared Messiah. His authority and that of the church is the authority of Jesus himself, the Son of God.

But then, a little surprisingly, Jesus tells the disciples that they mustn't tell anyone else that Jesus is the Messiah. The people are not yet ready to hear it; the people of God have their own expectations of what the Messiah is going to be like. Perhaps their expectation was of a great warrior king who will destroy the Roman forces and bring Israel back to a place of honour and power. Jesus knows and understands that the people will expect that worldly show of power and authority. Their human understanding of the role of the Messiah is very different to the Saviour that Jesus is going to be.

And I think, this is the challenge for all of us. Who do we say that Jesus is?

What is our understanding of him as Messiah, of Saviour, as Son of God, as Friend?

You have an image in front of you that you were given as you arrived today. Is this your image of Jesus? Does this image surprise you in any way? Is it helpful? Or is there something that is missing when we, as human beings, try to capture something of the beauty, compassion, power and love of God expressed through Jesus.

The image that you are holding is part of a set of images produced in a resource called 'The Jesus We Share'. The idea of the resource is to gather images from different cultures and artistic styles. I very often use this resource in small groups when thinking about who Jesus is. Who Jesus is to us? Who Jesus is to the world?

Sometimes we have a very fixed image of Jesus in our minds. It may be the image of Robert Powell who played Jesus in the 1977 film, Jesus of Nazareth. Or it may be an image of Jesus, 'meek and mild' that might have adorned a childhood Bible, or maybe a pre-Raphaelite or Renaissance masterpiece. Or it may be a myriad of other images that have spoken to us at different times in our lives. However we picture Jesus, the challenge of the Gospel today is to answer that question for ourselves. When Jesus asks us 'who do you say I am?' what is our answer? And are we prepared to share our answer with those that we know, those that we love, those that we meet and those that God is yet to put across our paths?

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, Messiah, Son of the living God.

Give us strength and courage to acknowledge you as lord and ruler of all and live our lives in your service and to your greater glory.

Amen