

A Reflection from Revd Ali for Trinity 15

In our Gospel reading Jesus and his disciples are travelling together, around the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and as they walk, they talk. Jesus asks his disciples that most important question, the question that we all need to face at some time – just who is Jesus?

The disciples have spent the last couple of years getting to know Jesus, they have witnessed the most amazing miracles, seen people healed and restored and even brought back to life. Thousands have been fed, and others have received hospitality from Jesus in ways no other religious leader had offered. They have sat at his feet and listened to him bringing alive the Kingdom of God, they have witnessed him challenge those in authority in such a way that has left them speechless. They have walked with him, and camped with him, laughed and cried with him, and now they come to a turning point.

Jesus knows that they are heading towards Jerusalem and he wants to know if the disciples are truly with him. He knows each of them, their strengths and weaknesses, what makes them laugh or cry. Jesus knows what made each of them give up their day jobs to follow him, he knows their hopes and dreams, their doubts and fears; but do they really know him?

So Jesus asks them ‘Who do people say that I am?’

There were all sorts of rumours going around, was Jesus John the Baptist, Elijah, or another prophet reincarnated? The disciples tell Jesus about the gossip, but then Jesus asks them a more difficult question:

“But who do *you* say that I am?”

The disciples are put on the spot. Jesus is asking them to really reflect on the time they have spent with Jesus. Is Jesus just another rabbi? Well, if he is, there are plenty more to follow if things go a bit pear shaped. Is he is a prophet? Well, there have been lots of prophets in the history of the people of God. Is he is just a really good man, a great friend, a brother? Well it has been quite a ride so far. But if Jesus is more than those things, if he is the one that the people of God have been waiting for, then that really changes everything.

Jesus prompts them “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter responds from his heart. He doesn’t spend time considering the pros and cons, he just blurts out what he knows: “You are the Messiah.”

The people of God were expecting a messiah to come. They had clear expectations as to what the messiah would be like and especially as to what he would do. The messiah would be a king like figure, he would cleanse or rebuild the temple, he would defeat Israel’s enemies and he would bring God’s justice into the world.

I wonder, is it this expectation that is behind Peter’s declaration? Or is it a heartfelt realisation that Jesus is the Son of God, the one they have been waiting for, the one who will put things right for Israel.

So, Jesus stops the journey, gathers the disciples around him and explains what Peter’s revelation means. This is not going to be the triumphant revolution that the people of God have been waiting for. The kingdom Jesus will bring in is God’s kingdom not an earthly one. Their historic expectations have to be turned upside down, and so he begins to teach them about the suffering and rejection that the Son of man must endure, suffering that will eventually lead to his death and there is nothing, nothing that Jesus or the disciples will be able to do to stop it.

Jesus is asking if the disciples ready for this? Are they ready to 'pick up their cross' whatever that might mean? Jesus explains that following him isn't all about miraculous feeding, healing and other signs and wonders, it is about being willing to lose your life, to give up your everything you value for the kingdom - the kingdom of God.

Jesus knew that just by following him the disciples were putting themselves in danger. Following a new teacher was a risky business, especially if their message was unpopular. And they had the recent example of what had happened to John the Baptist in the forefront of their minds. But now Jesus spells it out to them, it's not just a possibility that might happen, the Son of Man has to walk straight into it, and will face death, and they have to understand and be prepared for it.

He hasn't come to be a feted earthly king that everyone will rally behind leading to victory over Israel's hated enemy. He has come to bring God's kingdom in and the only way that he can do that is through his death on the cross. Jesus wants them to know, and to be sure that if they want to follow him, to be his disciples, then they too have to be prepared to take up their cross and, and follow him.

Then while they are still reeling from his revelation, Jesus tells them that that isn't the end. He spells out for them that the love of God *will* triumph. Jesus *will* rise again, and those who give their life, whether literally or through living their life for God, living sacrificially, will find eternal life through Jesus.

It's a choice Jesus asks each of us to make.

Peter understood in his heart, in the nanno second that he takes to respond to Jesus' first question – you are the Messiah, but then his head takes over. As he listens to Jesus explain the reality of what is going to happen, his clarity about Jesus turns to misunderstanding. He turns from understanding Jesus' divine purpose to thinking purely of his friend in an earthly way – he can't suffer and die like that surely?

And that is our challenge too - just like the disciples. We have to decide just who Jesus is. Then we have to decide how to live our lives according to the decision we have made. Like Peter we are only human, we sometimes listen to our heads when we should respond to what God has put in our hearts. We can put off making a commitment for years. We can hide from the truth that whispers into our hearts and urge us to take that next step of faith, for now, for the whole of our lives, and at the moment of our death.

Jesus walks beside us every day, and he asks us, 'Who am I?', are we ready to answer him, like Peter 'You are the Messiah.'

Are we prepared to take a risk, to respond to his call upon our lives, to be prepared to take up our cross and follow him, to be counter cultural, to believe in the power of love not the love of power and to do whatever he needs us to do to follow and work with Christ to bring about the Kingdom of God in this place.

Amen