

Mark 8:27-38 – Christ Church, Totland

There was a man who, every day, visited his wife in her nursing home. Every day he would bring her a box of Maltesers and everyday...she would sit with him and smile and eat every last one. When she had finished...she would get up and walk away...and he would blow her a kiss, until he could see her no longer. Memory loss had been a slow burner at first but now his darling wife, was slipping further and further away, in the fog of dementia. His friends would ask...why do torment yourself...why do you keep going to visit when she doesn't even know who you are... and he would always reply... because I know who I am.

Who do you say I am says Jesus...in realizing who Jesus is and the meaning of the gospel he embodies, we start to realise who we are and what are lives really are about....

Mark's gospel doesn't give us much detail about the scene, but when I imagine what happens next, I see the disciples falling into a long, awkward silence. I imagine them avoiding eye contact with Jesus. Shuffling their feet. Coughing. Casting anxious glances at each other. I imagine every single one of them desperately hoping that someone else will answer.

And I imagine Jesus, standing patiently and vulnerably in their midst through that long silence, waiting to hear what his closest friends will say about him. Do they really know him? Have they learned to trust his heart and his words? Do they *love* him?

Cue Peter. Bold, reckless, earnest, impetuous Peter. When the silence becomes unbearable, he throws himself forward and answers the question as confidently as he can: "You are the Messiah."

A perfect, A-plus answer. The whole gospel story in a nutshell. The Truth with a capital "T." Right?

Wrong. Or, at least, not quite...

Because this is where the story gets turned on its head.

Instead of praising Peter's discernment, Jesus tells him to keep his mouth shut, and immediately launches into a grim description of the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem.

He paints a picture so bleak, so upsetting, and so counter-intuitive, Peter pulls him aside and tells him to knock it off. But this — Peter's insistence that Jesus fit into *his* watered down comprehension of Messiah-ship — hits a nerve so raw, Jesus turns and rebukes Peter in turn. What's more, he does so using words that shock us still, two thousand years later: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

As strange and stinging as this exchange is, I love it. I love first of all that Jesus and Peter are intimate enough friends to survive a hard fight. Only friends who are powerfully bonded can tell each other off so harshly and live to tell the tale together afterwards.

More importantly, I love that Peter's confession of faith — "You are the Messiah" — signals the *beginning* of his exploration of Jesus's identity, not its end.

As soon as Peter thinks he has the answer to the question nailed down, Jesus shuts him up, challenges what he knows, and nudges him back to the starting line:

Yes, I am the Messiah. No, you have no idea what “Messiah” means. In fact, you’re not even ready to know what “Messiah” means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. There’s so much more for you to learn, Peter. So many more answers for you to grow into. Be patient. Don’t force the locked doors. Try to love what is unsolved. Keep living the question.

When I think about the whole of Peter’s story — all the biographical details that we 21st century Christians have the privilege to know and ponder — I’m stunned by the answers that Peter must have lived into as time went on. “Who do you say that I am?” How about if Peter had answered it this way...

You’re the one who said “Yes, come walk on the water with me.” You’re the one who caught me before I drowned. You’re the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame. You’re the one who told me —

accurately — that I'd be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. You're the one I denied to save my own skin. You're the one who looked into my eyes when the cock crowed. You're the one who found me on the beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation. You're my Messiah.

The question Jesus poses to Peter and his disciples is asked of us, every minute of every day. Every decision we make is ultimately a response to the question...but who do you say I am?

Our love for family and friends, our dedication to the cause of justice or ethical practice, our taking the first step toward reconciliation and forgiveness, our simplest acts of welcome, kindness and charity... our deep love and compassion, for another through trial and change...declare most accurately our belief, in Jesus as the messiah and redeemer, of the world.

When Jesus asks the big question 'But who do you say I am'? He does not want to know what his disciples have been told; he wants to know

about their own relationship with him and their vision of who he is... and for Peter to hold the keys and vision for the church...for the journey ahead!

Jesus knew that Peter had to be secure, and on solid ground about who Jesus was to him...especially for those times when his fear crept in and he stumbled from the rock, the foundation of the faith, for which he was entrusted ...it is a personal question!

Jesus asks each one of us today ... who am I to you? Because when we stumble and we fall, and fear creeps in to our lives... we need to rest secure... of who Jesus is for us...today, tomorrow and for all eternity.

This is not just head knowledge...this is not just helpful teaching...this is not just tradition and what we have grown to believe...this is not just encounter... this is personal. What we know deep within our spirits, deep within our hearts...in every moment of simple but profound faith, where we sense the tangible presence of God, of his mercy and grace in our lives...and in the life of the world around us...

Going about our earthly lives as forgiven people who are called to share our song of redemption with others...and where we make our affirmation of faith in Jesus... and his promise of life, in all its fullness...not just here on a Sunday, as we gather together...as beautiful and honouring as that is...but also everyday...with those around us...

Sharing in Peter's often faulty but gritty, determination to build-up the body of Christ, here in our time and place, in every moment that God gives us, in every decision that confronts us; and like the honouring of a devoted husband...to his beloved wife...who had slipped away but had not left the room; in every beautiful and broken relationship, for which we too are blessed.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? It's a question to ponder for a lifetime. A question that has so many others folded into it: What stories of Jesus have you inherited?

What "truths" about him do you need to say goodbye to? How might you be blessed by his loving rebuke? Is he merely *the* Messiah? Or is he yours?

What Peter learns in this encounter is that Jesus is just as powerfully present in the questions as he is in the answers. Maybe even more so.

To love what is unsolved is not to deny Jesus his Lordship. It is to allow Jesus to enter more deeply into your heart than any impersonal truth about him will ever do. Live the question. That's Jesus's invitation, and he makes it over and over again, in love... who is Jesus to you!

Amen