

Mark 8:27-38

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'

28 They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

29 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

Who do you say I am?

Mark 8:27-38

This is ultimately the only question that really matters, because in the end if Jesus was just another rabbi, just another religious leader, just another preacher who came and went, then we have no hope. And the claim he made is that He was equal with, and indeed was and is God. Let's be crystal clear about this in case we are in any doubt, He did not found a religion in the way most people understand religion. He is entirely different from all other religious figures and stands apart from any other human being because he could not be accused of any sin. Well, he was accused, but the people who accused him, in the end, were the hypocritical religious leaders themselves. Even the Romans in the end washed their hands of the matter. What about the Jewish Messiah? well the Jews are convinced even now that he has yet to come. What about other religious leaders? If you begin to investigate, there is very little to go on. Buddha - well not a lot is known about him, the facts are a bit vague. No written records were found from his lifetime or from the one or two centuries after that. Guru Nanak who founded Sikhism, Krishna who founded Hinduism, much the same. None of these claimed *equality* with God, and accounts of their lives are vague or nonexistent. Muhammad is the only one we know much about, and although much revered by many, he was clearly a fallible human being. I want to talk a bit about him, as what you might call Jesus's main rival for attention today.

Muhammad was a politician and a military leader, as well as a self-proclaimed prophet. His initial understanding of God came from the Old Testament, and he claimed that his own revelations, the text of the Qu'ran, came from the angel Gabriel. He also acknowledged Jesus to be a prophet *and* the Messiah, and that his teachings were authoritative. The real question then is why the Qu'ran *denies* the really crucial bit which is that Jesus was crucified and died and was resurrected physically, although it does say that he was raised to heaven. Muhammad proclaimed himself and not Jesus to be the 'final prophet'. And so if the revelations were from Gabriel, one of Muhammad or Jesus was wrong. You can probably guess which one I would go with. The new testament describes Jesus as the full and final revelation of God, and does this a full five centuries before Muhammad.

There's a lot of information about Muhammad, but by contrast the gospel account of Jesus life is very compact and wastes very little time in coming to the crucial last week of his life. It's also very well documented because the new testament is the most historically reliable text of any of that era. Much of the history of the first century, such as the Roman empire, is drawn from a very much smaller number of original manuscripts. The gospel writers only give us what we need. And John ends his gospel with this: *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.* He leaves us wanting more!

Peter's confession is the central turning point of Mark's gospel. *Jesus asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'* It will be, I dare to say, the turning point in anyone's life if like Peter they decide to follow Jesus, and possibly also if they don't. Jesus forces us to ask the question. Although many of us might try and *avoid* the question, possibly repeatedly throughout our lives. If Jesus was who he said he was, all of us need to consider the question as being the most important one we can ever ask, as I said earlier, because of its implications. [HTC]

So I want you to do this now in groups, speak your answer to the question, Who do you say Jesus is? And it has to be personal, not just: well, he's the Messiah. Personal testimony please]

Peter simply didn't understand what he was saying when he said *you are the Messiah*. You clearly see that in his response to Jesus telling them he was going to die. And then Jesus's stinging response of *Get behind me Satan*. Another interesting thing here is that Jesus having agreed with Peter's assertion that He's the Messiah, tells them not to tell anyone. Why does he do that? Well none of the disciples understood at this point what the real mission was. The image they had of the Messiah, interestingly, and I've only just realised this having read up a bit on Islam, was something much more like Muhammad, a political figure as well as a teacher. We can see it's a popular thing by the spread of Islam. But Jesus completely overturned any Old Testament ideas that God's way of doing things was through politics and war.

He did of course teach many things from the Old Testament scripture, but he also rewrote a lot of it, much to the disgust of the religious hierarchy.

It all comes down to this: not who is God or even do you believe in God, because many people who are not Christians would say they do, but who is Jesus? and how do you respond to the challenge of his very existence?

Like the disciples we all have much to learn but hopefully we have begun to grasp the full meaning of this question. I'd say it's not something you can avoid if you're genuinely interested in the big questions of life.

I think the most shocking thing at the time was this line: *the Son of Man **must** suffer.....and **must** be killed. And after three days rise again.* What did that even mean? We're maybe a bit inured to this now having most of us heard it from the pulpit so many times, but to Peter and probably to most people now it would seem to be the least sensible possible solution to the main problem of humankind. For God himself to be born as a child and then to *have* to be killed in the most barbaric of ways so that we can all get to heaven, to be very simplistic about it. The statement seems brutal and who of us wouldn't react as Peter did? Not knowing what we know now? But Jesus' reply was this: *You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*

So we're forced to forget 'sensible' human logic and see things from a very different perspective.

As a confused Pontius Pilate asked 'What *is* truth?'. To which Jesus would reply 'I am the truth' although he didn't say that to Pilate, but to Thomas who wanted much more concrete answers to his questions than that. Jesus did not and does not present us with pat answers to our questions but leaves room for us to discover for ourselves how faith works. It's a very different thing to the mechanistic science obsessed way of thinking we now live with. His big challenge to the disciples is summed up in this: *whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

In other words how prepared are we to lay *everything* on the line in faith that Jesus spoke the truth. There is no scientifically measurable guarantee provided, no certainty. It's all or nothing. Nothing left to lose, but everything to gain. Certainty isn't a good sign in people of faith – I was listening to a discussion this week between Richard Dawkins and Alister McGrath, the ex-scientist and ex-atheist and now well-known christian theologian (who incidentally I once made a cup of tea for!) and I was really struck by how much more certain of everything the atheist Dawkins was than the christian McGrath!

There's not a lot we can be certain about but there are some things we can, one being that Jesus is the way the truth and the life and another being that he surely is with us, until the very end of the age. Amen.