

Who do you say I am?
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 8:27-38

16 September 2018

I am sure you all remember the children's game *Who am I?* Someone sticks a piece of paper on your forehead with the name of a famous personality on it. Everyone knows who you are, except you and you have to find it out by asking leading questions, to which people can only answer with 'yes' or 'no'. But there is another version of this game, often called *charade*, where the same question is asked by one of the players as they act out who they are and in this case the others have to guess the identity of the first player. However sacrilegious it may sound, we cannot help recalling those games when we hear this seminal story from Mark's gospel which John has just read to us. We might even wonder which version of the game is being pictured here by Mark.

From our vantage point of hindsight we might think that the scene resembles the second version, in which Jesus is the only one who knows the answer, and that the point of the story is the testing of the disciples, whose knowledge and insight, whose faith and loyalty is being questioned by Jesus. They had seen him acting out, who he was. They had seen his compassion as he healed many people from all sorts of debilitating conditions and sometimes unseemly backgrounds. They had seen him satisfying the hunger of masses of people who followed him around in the Galilean country side. They had seen him speaking wise and wonderful words with an authority they never witnessed before. They had seen him standing up to the pharisees and scribes and other Temple officials. Now they had to give an account of the conclusion they had come to about him having seen all this.

However, there is another way of looking at this story, which might bring to mind the first version of the children's game *Who am I?* I see it more as a stop-over on the road of Jesus' developing self-understanding. He is still working out who he really is and who he is to be. A next step, if you like, after the desert 'temptations', where some, mainly negative, boundaries for his vocation, were drawn up. He must not be just a miracle-worker or use his powers for his own benefit. He must not gather a big following simply by attending to all the needy people around him and gaining glory for himself that way. He must not think of God's kingdom in terms of world domination

etc. These were important decisions for an aspiring leader even if they came in the form of what shouldn't be done.

It has been a great temptation for Christianity and probably for other Faiths as well over their history to define themselves by the things their followers were forbidden to do. We know from our own experience, that sometimes we too quietly glory in the things we don't do *because* we are Christians and even look down on those who do them. But this is only one side of the coin, the negative side, as we said before. In this incident, on the road to Caesarea Philippi,

Jesus seems to be looking for a more positive definition of himself, that extra bit that is more than refraining from certain kinds of action, and that is even more than all the *good deeds* he had performed thus far. He is looking for that definition of purpose, which would decide his next step on his way. Hence his searching question *Who am I*. I imagine, he probably had put this question to himself regularly before and this time he is extending the search to those around him. *Who do people think I am*, those who have only seen my public side and those who know me more closely? And how does it all tie up with what I feel about myself in the depth of my own heart? And ultimately, how does it all tie up with the call of the God, whose beloved child I feel to be.

Well, we are all interested in how other people think of us. We may not put the question to them as directly as Jesus did, but we still keep looking out for the prevailing opinion about us. Asking direct questions like this can, in fact, be quite dangerous. People, like Jesus' disciples, might actually, answer them. And if they do, that would involve naming us, as the disciples named Jesus. A lovely friend of mine said to me recently "Bless your big Hungarian heart!" It made me wonder why did I feel less than pleased with this, when it was clearly meant as a praise, a compliment. Perhaps, because it wasn't really about me, it was putting me into a pre-conceived stereotype that this person held about Hungarians in general. As if it were said, 'you have a good heart, but then you would have, wouldn't you, because you are Hungarian'. Regardless of whether this statement was true or not, I am sure you can hear, why this may not have been an altogether positive assessment. Naming people can be a way of easy identification, a way of boxing them into a category, which may then short-circuit the process of harder, deeper prodding to find their real identity. Without wanting to be unfair to him, is this what Peter is doing in today's story, I wonder.

Is this what we are doing, when we glibly identify people like 'he is the one, who always talks about his foreign travels', or isn't she the one, who can't stop worrying about everything'? There is no doubting of Peter's best intentions. He is using the name expressing the highest accolade an Israelite could give to anyone: You are the Messiah, God's own Anointed One!

Now, a lot has been made of the fact, in biblical interpretation, that Jesus doesn't deny Peter's identification of him as the Messiah. It is difficult to say for certain what Peter means by this designation, but from what follows, it becomes clear that Jesus and Peter are not on the same page. It is quite telling that Jesus does not claim the title of Messiah for himself. Having forbidden his disciples to call him by that name, in the very same sentence he begins to talk about the sufferings of the Son of Man, his preferred name for himself. He is not fuelling the general beliefs about a heroic Messiah with superhuman powers, who will enact God's glorious rescue of the people from beyond. Instead, he opts for the role and identity of the authentic, the truly human figure with the attributes described in the Isaiah passage we heard this morning as our first reading.

There is no talk there of a victorious military leader that some craved for in those days, or of a divine figure saving souls for an afterlife, which a lot of us, Christians hoped for over the ages. The Suffering Servant, as he has come to be known, understands his calling in a very positive, very human, down-to-earth sense. His whole body is involved in his mission: his tongue is to be used to console the weary, his ears, his hearing is sharpened that he could listen out for God's instructions and presumably also hear those whom no-one else would hear. So far, so good, but he doesn't stop there. His back is offered to take the punishment, which will inevitably come, his beard is there to be plucked from his chin and his face is to be insulted and spit upon. He is to be despised and rejected and put to death.

Any wonder that Peter got upset? I bet he didn't even hear the bit about the resurrection! We may feel a bit superior to him because of what we now know, yet, hand on heart, would we want a leader who was heading for a certain and total defeat? This was not what Peter signed up for. And as he struggles with his dilemma, we have to forget about superiority for we are there with him facing the same question: Is our Jesus the victorious Saviour who shields us from the hardships, the suffering that we all have to bear at some

point or other during our life-time? The One, who will live up to our highest expectations and give us status? Or is he the one who shows us how to remain truly human in spite of everything that life may throw at us. Modelling to us a humanity that finds its *raison d'être* in listening to the inner urging of the divine imperative and in love and vulnerability takes care of others. No status, no safety net, only the firm conviction that 'The Lord God is my helper...The One who will clear my name is at my side' (Isa 50:7,8) to quote again from the Isaiah passage.

So we are back to names and identities. Jesus finds his identity initially during his baptism when he awakens to the fact that he is God's beloved child. It is being shaped by the Temptations in the desert. And later in the words of the Suffering Servant, whose name and identity had been overhauled by the skilled hands of God. The God who is standing by to confirm and uphold that new, sanctified identity with his intimate presence.

What is our true identity? Is it the sum total of our (perhaps slightly biased!) knowledge of ourselves? Is it a mosaic built up from the different opinions of others? Is it a culmination of our genetic inheritance plus our educational or training background? Perhaps a glorious mixture of all the above? Today's lesson is that Jesus was not looking for adoration or praise. Not from Peter, or from anyone else. He was looking for followers, people who, like him, have found their identity in being loved by God, and who responded, as he did, by living, and dying - if need be - for others. May we find joy in discovering our true identity as we follow him. **Amen**

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church

