

Bishop Jonathan's Sermon – Trinity 11 – Matthew 16:13-20

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Who do people say that I am?” That is what Jesus asks his disciples here. But *why* does he ask this question? Normally he was the last person to be concerned with what people thought about him – certainly to judge by the way he spoke to people like the Pharisees! So why was Jesus so concerned with what people thought about him all of a sudden?

Well, I believe Jesus was testing the water. He wanted to know how far people had got in understanding who he was and what he was about. And he wanted to know also how far his closest disciples had got down that same road. Hence his subsequent question to them: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

The people's answers are all very similar. They think that Jesus is John the Baptist, brought back to life after being beheaded by King Herod, or that he is Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the Old Testament prophets. All these ideas point in the same direction, namely that Jesus stands in the line of the prophetic figures of the Old Testament. People who speak out on behalf of God and who call Israel to renew their relationship with the God of their forefathers.

Peter's answer to Jesus' question on the other hand points in a different direction. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” It shows that Peter and the disciples are beginning to see that Jesus is more than just a prophet, and that he has a larger part to play in God's purposes than any of those who came before him. In Peter's mind, Jesus is God's Chosen One, the one who will set Israel free and bring in God's new Kingdom.

From this moment on Jesus adopts a new tack. As Matthew tells us, he begins for the first time to teach the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed by the religious authorities before finally rising from the dead. And at the same time he warns them that they must tell no one that he is God's Chosen One, the Christ. This is a completely new phase in Jesus' teaching and ministry, and one that will lead in the end to his death and resurrection.

So, Jesus was testing the water, to see how far people had got – and how far the disciples had got – in understanding who he was. But a crucial thing that we often overlook in all this is just *how* Jesus has gone about revealing who he is to the world, in all the events since the beginning of his public ministry.

At no point in his ministry does Jesus explicitly claim to be God's chosen Messiah – until this moment when Peter recognises and declares who he is – and even after this Jesus tells his disciples to keep it to themselves. Instead, he goes about teaching about the Kingdom of God and performing miracles which demonstrate his power over disease and death. The only time that Jesus publicly acknowledged that he was the Messiah was to the Jewish leaders at his trial before the Crucifixion.

So what exactly is going on and why does Jesus act in this almost underhand way?

Well, I think it's got something to do with the way he wants to get under people's skin. Above all – especially as Matthew portrays him – Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven. He taught about values and priorities that subverted the ones that were dominant in his day. He pointed to a new way of living that challenged and excited the people who heard him. And they kept on coming back, hungry to know more.

The Jesus of the Gospels is an extraordinarily challenging and engaging figure. His teaching has the power to raise questions in our minds about the way we live and about the values that shape our lives. And Jesus' own method for getting people to stop and think was to paint a picture of the Kingdom of God and of what it would mean for them to put that Kingdom at the centre of their lives.

Perhaps it is this Jesus that we need to recover and present to the people of our day – the challenging yet engaging Jesus of the Gospels. We need to find ways of communicating about him and of letting his teaching about God's Kingdom get under people's skin. I think that may be the best and possibly the *only* way to challenge the materialism and self-sufficiency that so often dominate people's lives.

Many people outwardly seem to have everything they need – and certainly they are unlikely to admit that there is anything they lack. But given the uncertainty created by the Coronavirus, when perhaps we have begun to realise that we haven't got all the answers after all, might it just be that Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God could offer something to capture people's imagination?

And the story we need to tell is something like this: Jesus is establishing a new way of living that can change the world from the inside out, and he wants us to get involved in what he is doing. Jesus is looking for people who will use their flair and imagination and energy to work for the creation of his kingdom on earth – a kingdom that is about justice and peace, about caring for one another and for the planet we share. This is about living lives that make a difference, because we have discovered that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Isn't that something worth getting involved in?

In the end, our aim is to get people to the point where they can join with Peter in saying to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But it may well be that we need to take a different route to those that have often been tried and failed: one that follows more closely Jesus' own method for enabling people to see who he is.

We need to take a fresh look at the Gospels and at what they tell us about Jesus and his message about the Kingdom of God. And then we need to allow that message to re-ignite our vision of who Jesus is and of what he offers to the people of our day. Amen.