

## Back to Church Sunday

### *Mark 8: 27-38*

The gospel reading today begins with Jesus asking some questions of his disciples. I like this idea very much – most often it is us asking the questions of God: *Where were you God, when I was in pain? Why do bad things happen to us? How do I make sense of the world? Can I really trust you?* We all have our own questions for God.

But here the tables are turned and Jesus is asking his disciples some questions. The first is: *Who do people say that I am?* In other words: *What are people saying about me, what do they see in me?*

And the second question is similar but with a more personal focus: *Who do you say that I am?*

The disciples answer the first question in a way that echoes what many today say about Jesus. He is seen as a great prophet, a spiritual and moral teacher, a righteous or holy man. Even though there is a growing movement away from organised religion in this country, there are not many who do not have at least a grudging respect for Jesus. Jesus is all of these things, a prophet, a spiritual teacher, a righteous and holy person, but is it the complete picture?

Jesus asks: *Who do you say that I am?*

The disciple Peter responds with an answer that goes much further than the previous answers. Jesus is not only a holy prophet sent from God, but he is the messiah, the Saviour, the very presence of God among us.

This takes us into a whole new realm of understanding, experience – spiritual reality.

If this is true, if the fullness of the presence of God dwells in Jesus, then God has come to meet us in an extraordinary way. If this is true, if the fullness of the presence of God dwells in Jesus, then what happens to him is scandalous and deeply shocking.

How strange and incongruent is the conversation as it continues between Jesus and his disciples. Having glimpsed heaven and earth coming together with Peter's insight, the disciples then hear Jesus immediately begin to talk about his impending rejection, suffering, death and resurrection, all of which are simply incomprehensible to his disciples, and still is, in many ways, to us.

Jesus, the very presence of God among us, chooses not to wield control and power through violence or domination, or to magically make everything better, but instead, through his intense suffering and horrific death, chooses to

identify most completely and most profoundly with the rejected, the alienated, the hurting, the victims of injustice.

And not only that, in his crucifixion, Jesus, the very presence of God among us, holds up a mirror to the darkest and ugliest aspects of the human heart - our sinfulness if you like – Jesus brings out into the open the violence, the brokenness, the distortions we all struggle with in order that we may be healed.

I'm sure it is certainly not the way we would have chosen to try and redeem or save the world.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus our darkness, whatever its source or cause, is brought into the light of God.

The Christian walk of faith then, involves our lives being moulded, nurtured and sustained by the Easter mystery; the mystery that is the gift of God's mercy and love. A love that goes to the very depths of our need, our struggles, our yearnings as human beings.

The Easter mystery is also an invitation to come to God just as we are – with all our pain, sadness, failings and our hopes, passions and dreams. God knows us at our worst, and God knows the very best we can become. Come as you are, for this is where new life begins.

To put one's faith in Christ then is to make a commitment each day to live a life of prayer, gentleness, humility, courage and thanksgiving. It is to live with the open hand of compassion and generosity rather than the closed fist of violence and self-interest.

It is also about making a commitment to live in community with others who also share our faith in Christ. We make this commitment in order to encourage, uphold and support one another, to share each other's burdens, to celebrate and have fun together, and to learn how to nurture deep and life-giving relationships so that we can take the love and life of Christ into the world together.

Through being a part of a Christian community of faith, often known as a church, we learn the meaning of forgiveness and acceptance, the appreciation of the different gifts each has been given, we grow together through study and reflection on the Scriptures and our sharing of God's work in our lives.

Sadly, through human nature, the Church has tended to become overly institutionalised and inward looking – sometimes to a degree that has effectively taken away all the life of the Spirit.

This is something we must continually guard against and why it is so important that we remain focussed upon Christ, the life-giving Word of God, and be ever ready to go where God may call us.

So many things we hang onto are really just props or distractions from the heart of a life of faith. This has been made very clear to me again over the last two weeks as I spent time with very poor Christian communities living in and around Malang in East Java. They have so little of what we take for granted, and yet, their churches are growing, passionate and full of life.

That is why it is good for us, as a community of faith, to ask others from time to time: *Who do you say we are? What do you see in us as the Church in this area? Do you see life, hope and freedom or do you see something else?*

May God truly bless us as we live with the questions of life and faith, may Christ come to meet us wherever we are on the road, and may we seek always, what is true, what is good, what is holy, what is life-giving for ourselves, our life together as a community of Christ, and for the world.

The Lord be with you.