

Who do people say I am? Jesus' question makes some sense. Crowds everywhere; questions, expectations, and all down to Jesus intriguing way of teaching and talking about God. So, yes - people are talking; and Jesus is curious about what they're saying.

The answers are predictable. Elijah - John the Baptist - a prophet...religiously particular answers that suggest a people in need of some comforting 'old-school' certainty. the answers are also wrong.

The disciples know that. Jesus knows that they know that, so asks them the same question. Who do you say that I am?

Peter answers for all of us: "You are Messiah". The church has been built on this answer. Our hymns - our Creeds - our history and our mission all take their shape in light of this claim. We are even pretty sure we know what it means to call Jesus "Messiah"...but then, Peter was sure that he knew what it meant too.

SO what does it mean?

The first thing Jesus does is explain what it means for him - and for his disciples. Betrayal - rejection - suffering and death. That's what it means. And Peter hears this and "rebukes" him...not a word we're used to hearing, but then 'warn' or 'scold' doesn't seem to cut it.

Peter has just had a lifetime of expectations crushed. Messiah was supposed to lead Israel to its rightful place as the leader of nations in the middle of the promised land. The arrival of Messiah was supposed to signify the end to Israel's problems. Jesus description does not sound like the end of problems, but like new, personal, dangerous problems...Peter is not having it, and says so. And Jesus responds with similar...enthusiasm.

"Get behind me...Satan...". We quite often make this the moment - Peter has been - in the same narrative moment - both most discerning and most reviled. We have made much of Peter sudden fall from favour (though it doesn't last...with Peter, until the resurrection, everything is fleeting) gives us some faint hope. We see our own frailties demonstrated in Peter's journey from cheerleader to critic to 'tempter'

But Jesus doesn't dwell on this moment, and neither should we. What Jesus does is make a distinction between the limits of our human impulses and the freedom that comes when God is our inspiration and motivation

You want to call Jesus 'Messiah'? You want to follow the One who came to show us God? Put your human impulses behind. Forget about personal agenda and selfish expectation. Stop thinking small. We can't help it, we can only imagine so much - even collectively. You want to follow me, asks Jesus: forget yourself - you are tangled up in human matters. Lose yourself in God. Learn how to think big, as only God can. Let God, who has no limits, guide your imagining. Take up your cross, Jesus says, and follow me.

Yes, this is about "that" cross - the way in which Jesus met his death is certainly behind this turn of phrase in the Gospels - but it is also about everything that stands in the way of a life of service.

Face your fears, your failures and be honest about your motives. Accept the possibility that God's vision for the world is more complete, and grounded in something more noble than self-interest. Put self (and self-interest) aside, Jesus says; and that is a tall order, for all of us.

And yet we are happy to call Jesus our Saviour - happy to acknowledge Messiah has come. We wrap our pronouncements in personal piety - inviting Jesus into our hearts - when what Jesus does is to draw us out of ourselves and into God's wild and wonderful plan for the transformation of Creation. Some of us will not die before we see that glorious kingdom come.

Does this sound impossible? Unbelievable? If so, then we are guilty of Peter's sin - thinking like humans; ignorant of the vastness of God's vision. The 'kingdom of God' comes in the compassion and grace that is revealed whenever people 'put away themselves' and follow Jesus. The kingdom of God breaks out in the streets when the hungry are fed and the naked clothed. When the sick or the imprisoned are visited, and the suffering find real wholeness - the complete satisfaction that comes when anyone is recognized as fully human.

If Messiah is nothing more than a religious (or political) figure that makes us feel better about ourselves, then we have failed to learn the lesson Jesus offers through Mark's Gospel. If Messiah is something to hide behind - something that sets us apart from those who don't believe, or who have no understanding of 'complex religious matters', then our faith is fraudulent, and we have lost sight of the glory of God. Because to call Jesus Messiah is to recognize that God took flesh and walked among us, to save us by calling our attention to those around us; to save us by putting to death our selfishness and pride; to save us by showing us what we were missing in the world.

"Whoever cares for their own safety is lost; but if you will let yourself be lost for my sake, and for the Gospel, you are safe." (translation - the New English Bible)

We are pilgrims - exploring the world, desperate to find purpose and satisfaction - and Jesus reminds us that if we join him on the journey, that purpose will be clear; our journey will never be without hope. God's promises - God's kingdom - are waiting for us - right before our eyes.