

Devotional Blog

Sunday 28th February

There is a famous story about Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister. She visited an Old People's home and strode up to an elderly lady sitting in the resident's lounge, shook her hand, and in a loud voice, said "Do you know who I am? The old lady smiled and replied "No, but don't worry my dear. If you ask one of the staff, they'll remind you".

Identity is important but getting a true picture of who you are dealing with can be difficult. The recent Presidential Election in the United States has vividly highlighted the alternative facts and contradictions that supporters and campaign organisers project about their leaders and their opponents.

In a way this is not surprising for not only is the prize for winning so great, but every Leader needs to ensure their followers and detractors do really understand the angle from which they see the world. Dictators and dictatorial regimes often have chilling ways of letting the people know what will happen to any dissent. The ordinary folk of Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, and Hong Kong have a noticeably clear notion of their leader's identity.

At the very mid-point in Mark's Gospel Jesus needs to find out what his motley crew of followers make of him. He asks two key questions: "Who do the public think I am?" and then, "who do you think I am?".

Throughout his Gospel Mark plays a double game with Jesus' identity. It's best described as an "open secret", at the same time it is both hidden and revealed. It's not surprising that Peter, the front man and spokesperson for the disciples, gets his answer to Jesus' two questions half right and half wrong.

Peter has made the breakthrough realisation that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. However, when Jesus points out that “yes” he is the Son of Man and that means his rejection, suffering and death; well, Peter is having none of it. Jesus firmly puts Peter in his place, and that place for Peter is to reject the world view of what the Messiah will be and get behind Jesus as a disciple.

It's easy for us to be critical of Peter, with the great benefit of hindsight, but we must remember that we have Jesus' question to answer ourselves. Peter has not been the only follower of Christ who has embraced the worldly view of power. It only requires a superficial knowledge of Church history to realise that the church down the centuries has been more in tune with Peter's ideas of power rather than those of Jesus.

And that brings the story right to us. Right here and now. That seemingly old question is still relevant and, in fact, really urgent: “Who do people say Jesus is?”. In order to answer it we need to add a second question: “What do people say about Christians today?”. We don't just share a family likeness to Jesus, but as we often say, “we are the only Bible that most people read”. The world will get to understand who Jesus is, in the main, through our behaviour, words, and actions.

This is particularly the case as the Pandemic has closed many of our church buildings. We are out of our comfort zones. We are out in the marketplace with power mongers, fake news, and commerce. But the message is the same: The Kingdom for which we are made is not built on the love of power but on the Power of Love.

God works through people who are willing to let love in. Who they are doesn't seem to bother God. Perhaps there will be some surprises in Heaven as new arrivals exclaim “was it you all the time and I didn't realise?”.

People will know Jesus' identity when we reveal it by revealing ourselves. In the words of Rosemary Wakelin:

You take the stuff of chaos, fear, and dread.

And make a path that we must bravely tread.

And follow where your gracious footsteps lead.

To share the work to meet each others need.

Mark Gilks

Hampton Mission Partnership