

“Who do people say that I am?”

13 September 2009

NT Reading: James 3.1–12

Gospel: Mark 8.27–38

‘Brothers and sisters, [wrote St James] not many of you should become teachers.

These words are particularly apt for me, a retired academic medical doctor:

And James could have added: ‘And even fewer should become preachers.’

... an interesting distinction: teachers, preachers.

Perhaps it’s true to say that teachers **explain**, whereas preachers **proclaim**.

Teachers impart knowledge and seek to stimulate curiosity in their pupils, and thereby facilitate reflection and self-learning.

Preachers teach, yes, but also proclaim – and, within a Christian context, that means proclaiming the Good News brought to humankind by Jesus 2,000 years ago.

And that, of course, is an added responsibility. As a preacher, I don’t have an entirely free hand – I must always keep in mind current Church orthodoxy. And, if seeking to shed new light on a well-worn passage from the Bible, I must be **tentative** rather than **dogmatic**.

But whatever I choose to say, I am limited to 15–20 minutes – a restriction which means that I can never cover everything; just hope to uncover a few aspects. Indeed, someone has said that all preachers are heretics because they can only emphasize part of a complex truth in the time allowed.

Well, today, I decided to play safe, and focus on **geography** rather than **theology**.

My copy of the bible has maps in it. They obviously indicate where the places named in the text are located but they also show how the borders of what we call ‘the Holy Land’ were chopped and changed throughout the centuries we label ‘BC’. Further, I discover that the Kingdom of Galilee was only about the same size as Oxfordshire, some 50 miles N–S and 30 miles W–E.

For me, these maps enhance my reading and understanding of the Bible. Take the Gospel Reading for **last Sunday**, in the middle of which we read:

‘Jesus went away from the region of Tyre, through Sidon, round towards the Sea of Galilee, and into the region of the Decapolis.’ [Mark 7.31 (T Wright)]

Because he travelled on foot, it intrigues me that Jesus started his journey from Tyre [on the Mediterranean coast, NW of Galilee] to the Decapolis [SE of Galilee] by first going 25 miles further N to Sidon – rather like going from Bristol to London via Birmingham. I ask myself: why walk 100+ miles when you need walk only 60–70? And why does Mark, in his brief racy account of Jesus’s 3 years of public ministry, include such geographical detail?

And in **today’s** Gospel Reading we read of Jesus and his disciples going from Bethsaida, a town on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, to Caesarea Philippi – a

hike of some 30 miles along the upper reaches of the river Jordan. Well, nothing special about that is there? Well, no.. but yes!

Both Bethsaida and Caesarea Philippi were outside the Kingdom of Galilee, ruled over by Herod Antipas. And **that** I believe is the answer to both last week's and this week's geographical 'puzzles'. It seems that Jesus was deliberately keeping out of Galilee in order to prevent himself being hauled in for questioning by Herod Antipas's secret police. Remember, it was not all that long since Herod had arrested and subsequently executed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptizer [read all about it in Mark 6], and that he [Herod] was being kept fully informed about the stir Jesus was creating throughout Galilee.

So, the geographical details in the Gospel narrative encompass a lot of cryptic information. For me, I imagine that Mark wrote his Gospel as a manual for teachers and preachers – and these geographical inserts were prompts for them to provide additional information which would further elaborate on the dangerous nature of Jesus's ministry.

So, at this point in my sermon, I offer you a few questions [food for thought]:

- Galilee was in many ways a northern Jewish 'backwater', separated by Samaria from the real centre of Jewish power down south in Judea. Why did Jesus focus most of his world-changing mission up north in backwater Galilee, and not in Judea and its capital, Jerusalem?
- Why, in the Gospel narratives, do we never read of Jesus visiting Tiberias, The lakeside capital of Herod Antipas, or Sepphoris, the second city in Galilee?
- Why did Jesus take his disciples further up north to Caesarea Philippi, the capital city of Herod Philip's Tetrarchy?

The answer to the last question probably lies in the fact that Jesus wanted to visit an impressive major city **which was safe for him to do so**, in order to provide an unforgettable visual impact on his disciples. It seems to me that Jesus took the disciples to Caesarea Philippi because it dramatically exemplified **worldly power and prestige, worldly fame and fortune**, and all its corrupting influence.

But this is where Mark loses the plot. His Gospel is based on what St Peter taught and preached over many years, and the part of the story which shows Peter in the best possible light is left out – possibly because Peter never recounted it to his audiences. It seems that, for all his faults, Peter learnt not to boast – indeed he made sure that people learnt of his failings so as to emphasize that God can use you and me, indeed wants to use you and me, even if we let him down time and time again.

To fill in the gap in the story, we have to step sideways into Matthew's Gospel. And this I can easily do because of Gospel Parallels [Matthew, Mark and Luke].

Let me read part of what Mark left out – the renaming of Simon as Peter [the bit after his declaration 'You are the Messiah']:

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church [community], and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" [Matthew 16.17–18]

Caesarea Philippi was situated on a hilltop, above an escarpment [cliff] about 100 feet in height. Towards the bottom of the cliff was a large opening to a cavern out of which gushed the headwaters of what ultimately becomes the River Jordan. The local name for this gushing cave mouth was – yes, you’ve got it – The Gates of Hades [the underworld].

So we can perhaps paraphrase what Jesus said... and at this point imagine Jesus looking at the gushing Gates of Hades and then moving his gaze slowly upwards to the impressive acropolis above as he said:

‘You are *Petros* [Rocky] and on this *petra* [rock] – yes, on you – I will build my new community and all this... immense **worldly power and prestige**, immense **worldly fame and fortune**... will not prevail against it.’

Wow! What a thing to say: The Kingdom of God, initially through Peter and a bunch of others from the Jewish backwater of Galilee, will not be overcome by even the greatest empire the world had yet seen.

And I believe that what Jesus said then is a message too for us today: however grim it may seem to be in present reality [either right here in Headington Quarry for you personally or over there in the Congo], know for certain that God’s community of love will have the last word.

And then Jesus begins to teach his disciples in plain language about what being God’s Anointed One meant for him personally, and would also mean for them too, in the challenging language of ‘taking up your cross daily’.

But for Peter this was just not on. He was all for victory in the traditional inhumane way, through power and might and inevitable bloodshed, through victimisation and subjugation of one kind or another. But here was Jesus talking about rejection and judicial execution. **This was just not on: ‘No way, Jesus! You listen to me...’**

But Jesus turns his back on Peter and snaps back: **‘No way, Peter! You listen to me...You think as men think, not as God thinks.’** [Mark 8.33 REB]

Amazing, isn’t it? Peter, the designated future leader, had not really begun to understand the true nature of the Kingdom of God – that it is **first and foremost a way of life, a way of community** and not a geographical location. A community of non-violence, justice, true neighbourliness, and peace – with a definite bias in favour of the underprivileged, the underdog, and the outcast – **empowered not by brute force but by God’s love.**

Truly amazing that after 2 years in the company of Jesus, Peter still had fixed ideas about a warrior Messiah. So, if Peter took so long to come to a mature understanding about the Kingdom of God, what hope is there for you and me who have not had the benefit of the immediate physical presence of Jesus?

Many of the older members of the congregation here today, myself included, used to sing in Sunday school:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child,

Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to thee.

'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild': and so, instead of the warrior Messiah, we were indoctrinated with the wimpish Messiah.

But, if the warrior Messiah is disowned by the words and actions of Jesus, so is the wimpish Messiah. Dorothy L Sayers once asked: 'How is it then that the Church has very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, and certified him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies?'

It seems crucial to me that, from time to time, we revisit our image of Jesus, and test it out again against the Jesus of the Gospels. If we're prepared to do that, we may be in for some surprises.

Remember: Jesus never asked people to worship him, but he repeatedly called on people to follow him. Someone said that it seems as if Christians are happy to worship Jesus, but that few actually follow him. [True or false?]

Remember what Mahatma Ghandi, the Indian non-violent freedom fighter, said [referring to the Gospel narratives]:

'You Christian look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisations to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle-worn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.'

So, as we move into the new academic year, and leave Summer behind us, let us revisit our image of Jesus, and seek to find a yet more genuine Jesus, neither warrior nor wimp.

In this connection, I'm delighted to say that already 13 people have signed up for the Exploring Christian Faith course beginning on 1st October – and we can still fit in 3–4 more. I believe the course is an excellent opportunity for folk, older and younger, to take time to think afresh about Jesus.

Those who attended the comparable course last year are about to start a house group to continue thinking together about the implications of what it means to follow Jesus – and that is great news. [And so too is the Justice and Peace group.]

But however you do it, do it! And may Jesus become more real to each one of us in the months ahead.

A concluding prayer
Genuine Jesus, warm and wild,
Look upon this wilful child.
Reveal yourself to me anew
As I seek to follow you.