

Sermon : Sunday September 12th 2021

Gospel: Mark 8: 27 – 38.

In this passage Jesus asks his disciples, Who do people say that I am? I don't suppose any friend has ever asked you that question! But it is evidence that Jesus was beginning to get a public reputation. This week I came across a recording of a British politician who had recently left his posts as a government minister and as an MP. He was told by the interviewer that she didn't know how to introduce him. He replied that since leaving parliament he himself didn't know who he was! Jesus's focus was not on his own self-questioning. It was a genuine question about what the public were saying about him.

The answers that Jesus' disciples gave were wide-ranging. They said that some people thought Jesus was his cousin, John. i.e. John the Baptist. This was strange since John had already been executed on the orders of the king. John's ministry, which involved a call to repentance and baptism in the River Jordan, was very widely talked about and it was believed to be a sign of the nation's spiritual awakening. But it seems people were vague about what eventually happened to John. Perhaps he could have come back from the dead?

Other people went far further back in history and said that Jesus was the prophet Elijah, who had returned to Israel in its time of need. In Old Testament times, calls for national repentance were often made, particularly by the prophet Malachi, whose book is the last of our Old Testament. Malachi looked forward to a day when God Himself would return to his temple in Jerusalem and put things right in the nation. And before that ... he would send the prophet Elijah to prepare the way.

Peter's answer to Jesus's question used a term from Jewish culture and history that we could struggle to fully understand: 'you are the Messiah', the Christ. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus strongly praised Peter for this answer. But then, as though to explain what those terms could mean in practice for Him, Jesus says that He "... must suffer many things, and be rejected by the religious authorities and be executed". He spoke so strongly about this that Peter began to rebuke him.

As you can imagine, Jesus's first question could have led on to an interesting social and political discussion about public opinion generally and current religious attitudes. But Jesus changes the whole mood and direction of the conversation by asking, But who do YOU say I am? It's a deeply personal question. The disciples must have felt that they were being put on the spot. Forget what everyone else thinks, who do You say I am? Whatever they said would reveal something, not about Jesus, but about themselves. They had possibly imagined they were going to chat about what everyone else was thinking, but suddenly they were personally confronted: What do you say?

I think that this question is being asked to us by Jesus this morning. No doubt we could have quite an interesting social and even political discussion about what people in our society say and think about who Jesus is, and was. I guess we could all contribute something to that discussion if we thought back to conversations we have taken part in, and broadcast programmes we have heard. But suddenly we find ourselves facing a completely different question from Jesus. Who do YOU say that I am? And our answers, if we are to attempt to answer truthfully, will have to be much more honest and closer to our hearts than we were expecting to have to give.

John's gospel reports a similar conversation when Jesus referred to his own death. At that time some disciples were already beginning to fall away from Jesus. And He said to the disciples who remained, Do you want to leave me too? (John 6 v.67). And Peter (once again!) replies "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". Peter has recognised Jesus as a chosen messenger of God, and he says that Jesus brings to them words from heaven. I'd like to spend the rest of the time in this sermon by thinking about his words. "You have the words of eternal life".

A few weeks ago Angela and I watched an edition of the programme *Songs of Praise*. I expect you might also have watched the very same programme. In the programme it told the story of a couple called Louise and George Blyth from Nottingham, who in the early years of their marriage, shortly after the birth of their second son, received the hard news that George was suffering from cancer. And it became clear that the disease was terminal. Later on during this time, one of their friends was at a wedding and she was approached by another guest there, who she didn't know. This guest said that she believed George and Louise's friend knew someone who was really sick. She offered to visit them and pray for them. When you think about it, that is a pretty extraordinary thing in itself. Louise described in *Songs of Praise* that she and George had no religious faith at that time but they agreed that the lady could come and visit them. By this time George was in hospital. The lady came and prayed for them and Louise described how that prayer transformed the situation for them both. Louise has since written a book about this whole experience. She said that at first she thought the prayers were 'great', but she thought that what was happening could not be real. Nevertheless a feeling "of peace, of lightness, of clouds" was left with them and the next day when she visited George he told her that his pain had gone. Louise said that they spent the remaining days of his life with a feeling of peace and hope and a sense of God's presence. Aled Jones asked Louise if she still thinks now about that Hope. She replied that if he had asked her ten years before what she hoped for she would have talked about her hopes for material success in life. But now, her hope includes a dimension of eternity. Her faith in God is her hope.

Were the words that George and Louise heard, the ‘words of eternal life’? I suspect that in one sense they were quite ordinary words that you might imagine yourself praying for someone who is very ill. But somehow the whole experience, the fact that this stranger had travelled from London to Nottingham for them, and they felt that she was there with them in the hospital, and surrounded by the care of the hospital staff, all this meant that this became a vast experience of grace and the closeness of God for them. The atmosphere in that hospital room was totally changed. The book that Louise wrote is called “Hope is coming: a true story of grief and gratitude.”

In a similar story, which I and my wife were part of, I know exactly what some of the words that were said were. We are convinced that for us and the other person involved they were indeed words of eternal life.

In the 1980s we lived in Singapore and there we attended a church where a strong emphasis was put on members going and praying for people who were unwell. One of the people we prayed for was called May. She was diagnosed with cancer at a time when her children were still teenagers. Her family were desperate to make a promise to God of what they would do for Him if May could be healed. We were very much aware of this when we visited her in hospital. We found her in a room on her own. Her body was very swollen, we presumed from the effects of the drugs which were being given her. In her bed were large heavy bolsters to give her some means of changing her position in bed while coping with the physical pain.

We read Psalm 139 with her, and May joined in as we read. She knew the psalm. Here are verses 7 – 12.

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

And we prayed with her, especially for her husband and her children. But May was also concerned about a man who was a patient in a room just across the corridor from her. She really wanted to get out of bed and walk over to speak to him, because she knew that he was very much afraid of dying. We don’t know whether that ever became possible, for she

died soon afterwards, but it shows something about May that her thoughts were for others and not for herself at that difficult time.

When I think back to that hospital room and the atmosphere in it, I think of it as an open space, filled with an atmosphere of calm. May was completely beyond the grief-filled striving which was burdening her family. Her trust was in God. She really believed that she had heard the words of eternal life. It felt as though we had been in an ante-room for heaven!

Words of eternal life. For May, Louise and George – I think that they were experiencing the effects of those words: a sense of the eternal presence of God here in this earthly life in which we can often come across pain and sadness.

I think the apostle Peter also had heard words from heaven in their discussions with Jesus. In a life full of stress and danger for him, and of suffering for the one whom he was recognising as the Messiah, what was most significant was that he heard words that put the hardships of his life's journey into the perspective of a vision that was eternal.