

The vagaries of our lectionary, the programme that we are given and encouraged to follow, of bible readings throughout the year has this year included part of our gospel reading twice. Back in February we were given Mark 8: 31-end as our gospel reading. When I preached on that passage I felt it was very difficult to interpret it without including the previous 4 verses in our gospel reading, and so we had the identical gospel reading then that we have had today. So now I feel charged with finding a different aspect of that reading to talk about. It could be said – that'll teach me for interfering with the lectionary.

But as I came to study all this in depth again this week, I was simply drawn to that same phrase that I was so drawn to back in February as being vital to us, as Christians. Jesus, asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?"

We are about half way through Mark's gospel, and this reading really marks a turning point in the gospel. Up until this point Jesus had been teaching the people he had come across about his Father God, and trying to tell them who he was. When you look at the first 8 chapters of Mark you get all those, shall we say, introductory events, stories – parables, and interactions with people Jesus met, that are all part of establishing what Jesus ministry is all about.

In order to give myself a picture of what was included I went through Mark's gospel and listed those sections.

You get John the Baptist, Jesus healing - a man with leprosy, a paralysed man, poor old Beelzebub who had a demon in him, and Legion, another man with a demon – that demon was cast into a herd of pigs who ran down the hill and drowned in the sea. You also get those events – the calling of the disciples, the feeding of the 5000 and the 40000, Jesus calming the storm, and later walking on water. It is all there and now all of a sudden the question – who is Jesus?

And the importance of the question is what happens in the second part of the gospel. Up until now Jesus has been crossing the Sea of Galilee one way then the other, finding different groups to talk to, searching for, as we saw last week, quiet spaces to go and pray, but now, in part 2 if you like, the journey is much clearer. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to live out what he was always meant to live out – to be arrested, charged, found guilty, and to be killed – but of course, then to rise again from the dead. Because that is what he came to do.

But in our passage, in the middle of all this, Jesus isn't saying, "This is who I am": instead he is asking the disciples. And up until this point people's response to Jesus have been few and far between. Expressions of faithfulness have come from unlikely quarters. They have come from a woman who would have been considered unclean in Jewish circles as she had been bleeding for years and just wanted to touch Jesus clothes as she believed that would heal her. There was last week's Syrophenician woman – a Gentile – who challenged Jesus' initial decision not to help her to such an extent that he cast the demon out of her daughter.

And then there the deaf man with a speech impediment, who Jesus healed, who was also a Gentile. And that's about it and this doesn't sound like a great response from the Jewish nation that Jesus had come to as their Messiah.

But what about declarations of Jesus' true identity as God's Son? Well in chapter 1, verse 1, the writer Mark starts by saying, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God." And then there was God himself after Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." And actually also by those demons that Jesus cast out. In the first chapter we hear, "Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an

impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

A bit later we are told that Jesus had healed many people and cast out evil spirits. "For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God.""

And when he met Legion, the spirit who had taken over Legion, "shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!"

But no humans had said to Jesus who they believed he was. But Peter now says, "You are the Messiah."

And that is quite a statement, but it's really important for us to understand at this point what that actually means, what Peter actually meant. Calling Jesus, 'Messiah' doesn't mean calling him 'divine', let alone the son of God. Mark believes Jesus was and is divine, and will eventually show us why; but this moment in the gospel story is about something else. Peter is talking about the politically dangerous claim that Jesus is the true king of Israel, the final heir to the throne of David, the one before whom Herod Antipas and all other would be Jewish princelings are just shabby little imposters. The disciples weren't expecting a divine Redeemer; they were longing for a king. And they thought they'd found one.

And this tells us why Jesus warned them not to tell anyone, because he recognised that whilst Peter called him the Messiah, which was correct, Peter's understanding of the Messiah was incorrect. Jesus was there to do a specific thing – to die on the cross so that our sins can be forgiven. He is about, in part 2 of the story, to set off to Jerusalem, to complete his mission, and the last thing he needs at this point is for the Roman authorities, or the Temple leaders, to suddenly hear that there is a threat to Herod's rule from this Jesus of Nazareth which they could use against Jesus. Jesus doesn't want an earthly rebellion: he wants a spiritual rebellion. So he starts to teach the disciples what is going to happen next, and he predicts his death.

Then Peter rebukes Jesus for saying precisely that, and the Peter who had just been congratulated for recognising Jesus as the Messiah is now apparently criticised for arguing with Jesus. So what is Peter actually doing. He is, perhaps not surprisingly, thinking as a human. And here we have the conflict that was going on then, and still goes on with us today.

It is commonly believed that Peter was a key source for Mark's gospel, and so if the story of the rebuke of Peter by Jesus comes from Peter himself, then we surely have before us an eyewitness account of what happened in this verse. Peter doesn't come out of this well – so he's not going to have made it up! In trying to avert Jesus from suffering, Peter, in a way he cannot know, opposes a deep mystery of God, for suffering is the only way to destroy the stronghold of Satan, which is Jesus' declared purpose from early in the gospel. Jesus sees in Peter's rebuke an opposition to the essential design of the incarnation. To think in human terms, when human terms conflict with the things of God, is no longer to be a disciple of Jesus but a disciple of Satan.

The name 'Satan' derives from the Hebrew word of the same pronunciation meaning, 'an adversary'. Jesus seizes Peter's rebuke and turns it on him. "Out of my sight, Satan!", he said. Jesus' concept of Messiah is not satanic, as Peter suspects; but Peter's attempt to avert him from it is. When disciples play God rather than follow Jesus, they inevitably become satanic. Jesus and Peter, God and humanity, are at, "cross" purposes, since at the heart of the discussion is the cross.

For Peter the indication that the son of man will die is unthinkable. For Jesus it is inevitable.

And doesn't all this, admittedly quite deep, and I often feel quite dark, discussion, still reside with us today? There is just so much about Christianity, about what we read in the bible, that can be so hard to understand, and if we are not very careful these sorts of issues can come between us and God. Like they did with Peter. We can spend much time and energy trying to interpret passages of scripture that many very wise people have devoted their lives to trying to interpret. And I sometimes find that when I have read some of the commentaries that I read in preparing my sermons, I simply have to walk away from them and, before writing what I want to say about a passage, I have to remind myself what is good news about what I have just been analysing.

And the Good News here is Peter himself. As I have said many times before I love Peter. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He takes risks. He makes mistakes. He gets knocked down but he always gets back up again.

Peter, I am sure, only said what he said, because he was, by and large, the spokesmen for all the disciples. They didn't really understand what was going on yet. It is in part 2 of the story in Mark's gospel, that they gradually began to understand.

In the passage I have been talking about Peter got one thing right, "You are the Messiah", even though I'm not sure he fully understood what that meant, yet, and in other gospel versions of this story Peter gets congratulated for saying that, but then gets knocked down for criticising Jesus. But is Peter then ignored by Jesus? No. The next part of Mark's story is the Transfiguration, where, just 6 days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain where they witnessed that amazing sight. The story is at the beginning of chapter 9 if you want to look at it later.

And that is what we should be doing. There will be times in our Christian lives when we feel knocked back. Perhaps something which we felt was the right way forward was blocked. Perhaps just being part of church seems too difficult. Or perhaps we find ourselves being too human. Perhaps our human problems are very difficult, and the only way forward that we can see is by solving them as humans. And we don't know how to do anything about it.

But is that not where church comes in? Are we so far away from feeling like a Christian family that we can't reach out for help? Because if we are then that needs urgent attention. Putting ourselves in the hands of God can often be the hardest way forward but, as Peter would testify to, eventually, it is always the best way forward. And that is a vital part of the answer to Jesus' question – "Who do you say that I am?"

Amen