

Circuit Podcast 23rd August 2020 'Who do you say that I am?'

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Each week since lockdown we have had a family zoom meeting at 9am on a Sunday, a convenient time for my sister and her children who live near Brisbane in Australia. For them it is Sunday tea time and my niece Elsie who is six has been doing a lot of wondering recently about her family, her relationships and how everyone fits together. When we zoom she is full of questions and has taken to naming us according to our relationship. She says to me, 'hello, my mum's sister', to Roy, 'hello, my mum's sister's husband', to my daughters, 'hello my mum's sister's daughter' and so on. After that there are often questions about the past, about grandpa's misspent youth or what her mum did when she was small. Elsie is working out who she is and everyone else's relationships to her and to each other. It is a question of her identity.

The passage we heard from Matthew comes after Jesus has walked on the water, stilled the storm, fed the crowds, taught and healed many people. He has taken the disciples to a quiet place in Caesarea Philippi and asks them two questions. The first is, 'who do people say the Son of Man is?'

The disciples' answers are perhaps similar to those we might hear today. Some say Jesus is a teacher he has great wisdom and knowledge and is able to help people understand more about God. Others consider him a prophet, rather like John the Baptist who was unafraid to speak truth to power even in the face of danger. We might note the way Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man – quite literally as one of us and with us.

Then comes the second question, 'and who do *you* say that I am?'

It is Peter who catches a glimpse of the future and uses the word, Messiah, Son of God. Jesus blesses him and tells him he will be the rock on which the church is built, he will be fundamental to what will come next. The word Messiah to Peter would have meant the true king and the one that Israel has been waiting for to overcome their oppression and restore their people. Jesus knows that he will be more than they can possibly expect and utterly different from what they know, yet this is still the right word. Jesus the Messiah, God with them, God with us, in relationship with those early disciples and also with us today.

Who do we say he is? I wonder how you imagine Jesus? Perhaps a black or a white man? Perhaps tall? Perhaps on a cross or on amongst people? The Methodist church has published a set of images of Jesus from around the world called The Christ we Share. The images are hugely varied and what becomes clear when you spend some time looking at them is that in general, we imagine Jesus to be like us, relatable to our culture and place, wherever that happens to be. In truth of course, Jesus would have had brown skin and looked like someone from the Middle East.

But our understanding of who Jesus is much more than skin deep. There is a sense in which this is a pivotal text, from this part of the gospel we go on the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus goes to show both them and us who he is. As soon as he has confirmed he is the

Messiah he proves to them that he is a very different from what they expect. You may recall that Peter is later rebuked by Jesus when he suggests that Jesus cannot be anticipating suffering and the cross because this isn't what Peter has imagined at all. Yet, this is how it is and Peter will eventually understand.

The great theologian, Karl Barth¹, referred to Christian ethics as 'The Great Disturbance' He meant that God is so radically different from our way of thinking that Christian ethics are inevitably disturbing to all human structures and institutions. The question of who Jesus is becomes deeply disturbing for the disciples as their journey progresses and the realisation must dawn that they have embarked on a journey they simply could not have anticipated.

Are we prepared to be so shaken by this Jesus? The question might be framed for us too. Who do we say Jesus is and how does this change who we are? If we choose to follow Jesus we are challenged to a gospel of love, truth and justice. But what does this mean?

I was shocked just the other day to read comments written in a popular newspaper about the Sudanese refugee boy, whose body was found on a beach near Calais a few days ago after his small boat had collapsed during his attempt to cross the channel. Some comments were celebratory, 'one less' they said, 'thank goodness he didn't make it'. I wonder how we can live in a society where such remarks are acceptable to anyone.

In the face of the BLM campaign, in the violence perpetrated in the name of discrimination and hatred on the grounds of race, I wonder how we can live in a society where such behaviour is acceptable to anyone.

In our lack of response to climate change and in the wilful disregard of humankind to environmental challenges, I wonder how we can cause such havoc and destruction in this world of God's creation.

These are just a few examples but as Christian people our response to all these issues and more must be shaped through the eyes of Jesus, how we react to such things tells the world a great deal about who we are, our values and our ethics. What is our identity in Christ?

Jesus looks on Peter and the other disciples with love as he begins to reveal to them who he is and what this will mean for them all. They travel on in hope and anticipation, their relationship of trust is absolutely key to who they are and who they are going to become. Our relationship with God is key too, who do we say Jesus is and how will we share and live in that knowledge? Do we know that we are both loved and challenged at the same time? Do we know that we can seek encouragement and strength and hope? Questions to ponder perhaps as we develop our identity as disciples, in the knowledge that Jesus keeps on walking with us.

Let us pray:

¹ Karl Barth Oxford University Press. 1933 The Twelfth to the Fifteenth Chapters THE GREAT DISTURBANCE THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS XII. I, 2 vv. 1, 2.

Eternal God,
present in the world before time was known
mysterious, awesome, God beyond our understanding
yet as close to us as our own heartbeat,
we bring you our praise and worship.

Jesus, the Christ,
known as a friend to strangers, sinners, and outcasts,
and as teacher, healer, mystic, and wisdom;
recognised by some as the Messiah
we bring you our praise and worship.

Spirit of God,
Advocate, Comforter, Counsellor;
Encourager, Guide, and Enabler
you take our stumbling footsteps, inadequate words
our failings and misgivings, and transform them.
Encourage us to follow the Way of Christ,
as disciples of faith
open to learning more of him each day. Amen.