

Who do you say that I am? (1st of 3 Sermons)

Lent 1 2015 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

Over these first three weeks of Lent I will offer some reflections on someone we hear rather a lot about in church, but I make no apologies. We use numerous words to address him; lots of words to describe him.

We have been united as a Christian body down through the centuries by his very name and we have been divided from one another within that body, let alone separated from other faith groups, because of our varying interpretations of who he is or who we claim him to be. Many of us claim a power in his name, but it also has the power, it seems, to tear us apart.

Is it important? If one is content in a sleepy semi-detached suburban sort of existence, one may well question that. If, on the other hand, you have care for, or indeed *are* one of a Christian minority, say, in northern Iraq or some other part of the world, where you may find yourself under fear of death if you do not renounce faith, then perhaps you see the point more sharply.

But, if we in the west assume that such a problem is one of Islamist extremism and not *also* created by our own attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, then it is perhaps time for us within the religious communities to think again about the interpretation of what we claim to stand for.

I have strong memories of a young student about 30 years ago, who had grown up as what one might describe a normal sort of Scottish lad who went to church, but who in his late teens, converted to Islam because it all seemed much more logical. He settled in one of the minority Muslim groupings who themselves were persecuted within Islam.

He was one of the nicest, gentlest, most thoughtful, loving and God-seeking young people you could hope to find. But he could not make sense of what different Christian groupings were saying to him about the person of Jesus and his relationship to God; it didn't seem to add up, particularly in light of the diversity of Christianity and the great variety of their behaviour – not least to one another.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” How well prepared are we, alongside Peter and the rest, to give him an appropriate answer?

In the dark ages of studying real books, one of the standard bits of study kit was this, ‘Crudens Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments’ which tells you how many times every word in the old Authorised version of the Bible occurs – and where to find each one. There are more modern versions, but web searches have made this sort of thing a bit obsolete.

At the very front of this revised edition (1930!) is a list of some 120 different names and titles given to Jesus in the Bible – New *and* Old Testaments – but the original edition of 1737 had nearly 200! I am not going to go through a list of 200 names and

titles of Jesus in the next couple of weeks. Please go explore for yourself. Some of them are quite surprising.

Our hymns are full of them. If, like me, you were affected by the Jesus movement stuff of the 1970s, you'll have sung some pretty sentimental stuff, over and over and over again – very personal, devotional, at best liberating you from worldly anxieties; at worst trapping you in sentimental banality.

Even favourites still today, *There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son; precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy One*. Where are those actual words taking us, other than on a path of escape from the realities of the world that face us?

When we wake up to those realities and are posed with that question, "Who do *you* say that I am?", what might your response be? Would you stand with Peter and say, "You are the Christ!" – and know what you, or Peter, mean?

Christ! Other than unfortunately being corrupted to an expletive in our highly-educated western world (how confusing is that to peoples of other ways around the world?) and having come to treat that 'Christ' pretty much as a surname, Jesus Christ!... it is of course a title rather than a name, the Anointed One, Messiah, but that rather begs a few questions.

Why so important to describe him as the Anointed One? Same as kings, High Priests, maybe the odd prophet... but Jesus doesn't seem to want too much to do with Kings and High Priests.

But then, lots of things were anointed, things as well as people. We think of nice olive oil. But there are different reasons to anoint – for cleansing and healing as well as setting aside as special; as also in death. We may surmise an association of Jesus with kings and priests, but what kind of association does that turn out to be? I'll come back to that next week.

One of our problems, of course, is that language changes in meaning. That may be significant in the conversation we are participating in about same sex marriage over lunch today. And the *name* of Jesus in which we invest not just meaning but *power*, changes in sound; sometimes we invest a great deal of power in sounds and names themselves. Just a few hundred years ago, 'Iēsus' would be a common pronunciation, much closer to the Latin and the Greek. 'Jesus' would sound very odd. But neither is much like the Jeshua or Jehoshua that he might have expected to be called himself.

Does it matter? It all just means 'Saviour' doesn't it? But a Saviour in what sense? A saviour in the sense of making us feel comfortable and safe in the space that we have carved out for ourselves? Not exactly. We are told in the story of Jesus' birth that he will save his people from *their* sins. In a similar way, it was said of John the Baptist before his birth, that he would go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

And when Jesus was later approached by people telling of Pilate's atrocities in the Temple compound, killing worshippers who had come to offer sacrifices, Jesus

responded, not, “This is appalling, Pilate should be condemned!”, but “unless *you* repent, you will all perish likewise.” In other words, we all bear responsibility because we are all sinners together.

Would he say something similar today in Syria, in Ukraine?

“Who do you say that I am?” is not such a straightforward question. When Peter responded, “You are the Christ!”, Jesus was sufficiently perturbed to tell him and the other disciples not to mention this conversation to anyone else. To do so would cause misunderstanding and perhaps an instant end to his mission.

When that end came – and the disciples found themselves, after the resurrection, in a new situation – they spoke of him simply as Jesus of Nazareth. They did not use that ‘Christ’ or ‘Messiah’ title so readily. So long as they stayed around Jerusalem they didn’t need to. People were aware of the Jesus of Nazareth story.

But when the community was sent out away from Jerusalem, things changed. They came up against different kinds of questions – who is this Jesus? Describe him! How do you account for him? Questions came from cultural bases quite different from their own and with understandings quite foreign to their own. Their own language would no longer suffice; they had to look quickly for other ways to speak of him.

So over the next couple of weeks we will look at some of the major titles we find in the Gospels and Epistles: like Redeemer, Lord and Master and other associated terms; like Son of God and Son of Man.

Jesus, name above all names, beautiful Saviour, glorious Lord, Emmanuel, God is with us; blessed Redeemer, living Word... travel with us this Lent in our hearts and minds and reveal yourself in our lives, for the love of your name. Amen.