

## Who do you say that I am? (2<sup>nd</sup> of 3 Sermons)

Lent 2 2015 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

“Who do you say that I am?” The Messiah? The Christ, the Son of God? All these titles we use so readily in our hymns and hear read so regularly from our scriptures, what do we mean when we use them?

I remember a little ‘Chinese Whispers’ exercise, passing as quietly as possible, from person to person, the sentence, “I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of the Living God.” Forty or so people later, it emerged reduced simply to “Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God.”

“Jesus Christ is Lord” is so prevalent in the Epistles, it is thought to be perhaps the earliest form of Christian confession, simple and direct. ‘Lord’!

I want you to imagine that you worship on a privately owned estate where the Lord of the manor is a kindly person who wishes the good of all...

No, that’s too easy! Imagine the Lord of the Manor has gone away... but you still worship on the property... and you miss him!

‘Lordship’ in the New Testament overwhelmingly is represented by that word we sing in our worship, ‘Kyrie’ – Kyrios, Lord! Lord and Master, both. In this context, the Lord and Master is approachable: caring, merciful, compassionate... but nonetheless a distant figure, someone who instils awe, who is not just like you and me.

Kyrios is nearly always translated ‘Lord’ rather than ‘Master’. Where it is appears ‘Master’ in our English Bibles, it is where the Master is contrasted with the slaves, to make clear a distinction between them in the story.

There are other words for ‘Master’ – like ‘despots’ who ‘rule it’ over slaves; and ‘Governors’ who are work bosses. I knew someone who always said, when going off to pray, “I’m off for a word with the Guvner”. God was his personal director who would guide him in the little decisions of the day.

The other image that stands out in my mind is surviving all of one day picking strawberries for Hartleys jam, as a student, with a ‘boss man’ strutting around prodding a stick in front of your nose and snarling, “don’t pick that, don’t pick that; pick that!” I never buy Hartleys jam. Those sorts of Masters do not get the title ‘Kyrios’, Lord, in the New Testament. They are described in other terms and used as examples of undesirables.

But the underlying point here is that, in the world and language of the Bible, the title ‘Lord’ always implies ‘ownership’: possession of property, whether land or householder and, by implication, owner of people too. “Those are *my* strawberries, and I’ll prod *you* with my stick too if I need to!”

Now we might have plenty of ‘Lords’ around us; in Britain we may be more familiar with the concept of such titles than many people of the world. Indeed, our very particular and somewhat blinkered thinking about land ‘ownership’ has had an

impact on boxing in and parcelling out huge chunks of the world map over the last few centuries. And one doesn't have to look very far in a Fairtrade Fortnight to see the outwash of some of the effect of that thinking on those who have been disenfranchised from lands and their means of living in the process.

But, by and large, we have now separated the title and status of a 'Lord' from the necessity of ownership, or even responsibility for property. A 'Laird' has responsibilities, but a Lord can be detached these days. They *may* be landowners, but they do not need to be: they may hold an honorary title regardless of possession or enfranchisement.

But in that context, it is quite interesting to see where, in the New Testament writings, this word Lord, which we have so strongly adopted, is most used.

Mark – the earliest gospel – hardly uses it at all. Even on the Mount of Transfiguration, in our Gospel reading, Peter responds, "*Rabbi*, it is good for us to be here!"

Mark and Matthew both, have only one direct reference to Jesus as "the Lord", when he sends disciples to find a colt or donkey for him to ride when he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. If they are questioned they are to say, "The Lord needs it!"

Matthew has a few other references and Luke has somewhat more, as does John. But when you look at the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, you find they are *full* of the Lordship of Jesus – that's where we get all our familiar phrases: Jesus is Lord; Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; Put on the Lord Jesus Christ; the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and so on, be with you...

It's all coming 'out there' in the Gentile world, taking the message of Jesus beyond the familiar world of Jewish expectation of a Messiah. Luke, with the Acts of the Apostles, and John, arise in that world. As I was hinting last week, when we take a message away from our own culture and language, the nature of the message begins to adapt.

The reasons for that are probably many-layered, but there are perhaps three main ones. On the one hand, the *person* of Jesus has been taken away from believers. He had become distant in a sense, associated with a very Greek idea of the Eternal Word, the Logos, pre-existent from the dawn of creation, but now known in believers' hearts rather than in person.

On the other hand, the world that they travelled into made huge demands: social life and commercial life often revolved around local fertility cults and if you didn't subscribe to local gods and goddesses, you cut yourself off from the community, from being able to make any kind of living at all.

You obeyed the ways of your Lords and Masters – just as people did in the old days of the Baals – but the compromises that demanded of their faith were quite unacceptable.

But at the same time, we know that for the most part the apostles went first to Jewish communities and then worked from there out among the Gentiles. Among the Jews, “The Lord” had the most enormous overtones. For centuries it had referred to God himself: ‘Adonai, “my Lord” being substituted for that too-sacred-to-pronounce ‘Yahweh’. And Yahweh, the Lord, is not only maker, but owner and ruler of the entire earth.

“The earth is the Lord’s...”

So Paul and others are making a clear statement that not only is the God of the Hebrew people the one and only God, to whom we are all subject, but no-one is Lord and master of any piece of earth: the most we can be is a steward of it on behalf of the one God.

*And*, Jesus is also to be considered as God – the firstborn of all creation, who humbled himself in obedience even to death on the cross, and has been exalted to that highest place, worthy of every knee bowing in reverence and every tongue confessing him as Lord.

A good number of people today find it more difficult to use that term ‘Lord’, where once it was simply accepted; because our own language is so bound to our social structures, it has too many overtones of the wrong kind of obedience that comes from position – and a need to fit in, if not progress, in society, rather than a close relationship of the heart and soul to a compassionate Jesus.

Jesus used the term ‘Lord’ often enough in his own teaching, particularly in the parables, to describe the relationship between those who have power and responsibility and those who are subservient.

But the God and Father of Jesus who is Lord of *all* comes with that surprise of compassion and forgiveness; just as Jesus himself comes in the most unlikely of humble circumstances when he is born as a King in a stable.

And in the Gospels the relationships God seeks with his people are the relationships of Justice and Mercy, and compassion, absolutely appropriate for this time where Fairtrade, as Justice, is not just for a Fortnight but for Life. So too, the relationship of Jesus to his disciples is indicated as that of ‘Master’ in that sense of Rabbi, teacher, rather than ruler or overlord.

In the end of the day, we may prove unprofitable servants, entirely dependent upon God’s mercy, but we are nonetheless Jesus’ friends and companions if we seek to follow in that Way with him.

*A prayer of Brother Roger of Taizé:*

Close to you, Christ Jesus, it becomes possible to know the realities of God, by letting the little that we understand of the Gospel pass into our daily life. And this little proves to be just enough for us to advance, day by day, moment by moment. You never turn us into people who have arrived, but into humble people of God who, in all simplicity are seeking to place their trust in you.