

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

Lent 3 2015 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

When Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ!” In Matthew, Peter adds, “the Son of the living God!”

A few years ago a number of articles appeared in Biblical and in popular magazines, when a stone tablet was discovered near in Jordan, the Dead Sea. Written on it, in Hebrew, was a story which appeared to come from around the time that Jesus was born, allegedly telling of a man who was killed by the Romans and resurrected in three days: a messianic prince who will defeat evil, though himself be killed by an evil king; yet not be properly buried. The evil king is then miraculously defeated.

The story apparently makes some reference to Jeremiah 31 – that’s the chapter where God promises a new covenant, set upon his people’s hearts. No surprise that there was a buzz of speculation about it all – Time Magazine carried the headline “Was Jesus’ resurrection a Sequel?”

When word first got out about the resurrection of Jesus, the press as we know it may not have existed, but there was an inevitable buzz – enough for High Priests and Roman authorities alike to want to silence Jesus’ followers.

Whether or not his resurrection was spoken of as a sequel, or replay, in any way – something that may or may not have happened not so long before around the time of his birth, the words used by his disciples to speak of Jesus would certainly have worried the authorities, sacred and secular alike.

And the controversy that comes out over his trial and execution is at the heart of it. “Are you the Christ, the Son of God? The Son of the Blessed One?” ... and Jesus replies to the Sanhedrin, “You will see the Son of *Man* seated at the right hand of power.”

‘Son of God’... ‘Son of Man’... Mark begins his Gospel boldly: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God.”

Whatever that tablet found in Jordan was about, the title of ‘Son of God’ would be nothing dramatically new in itself. It was used to assert the divine right of rulers from Caesars in Rome to Egyptian Pharaohs to Chinese Emperors – Including asserting that certain Jewish kings were at least the *representatives* of the divine, rather than divine themselves.

But to use those words to proclaim a man from Galilee as a Son of God in this way at the outset was bold; very bold. To follow that up with a voice from heaven at his baptism or out of a cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration saying “This is my Son! Listen to him!” was bolder yet.

When Jesus then came before Pilate, Pilate wanted to know something a little different: “Are you the King of the Jews?” – to which of course Jesus gives a rather evasive answer, “*You* have said so!”

But that question about kingship is inevitably and intimately bound up with claims about being a 'Son of God'.

Not many people go around questioning the authority of the Queen. Most people take it as a 'given' that she and her family have the right to rule and live and act the way they do – that's the way things are; we are not a hot-blooded nation; we achieved a balance of power with Parliament long ago: Magna Carta and all that. We may have dropped, in any formal sense, the idea of the divine right of kings, but we nonetheless accept a monarchy at the heart of our constitution without really questioning it too much.

But, as Jesus was quick to point out to Pilate, all authority has to be justified in the end of the day – Pilate's own authority lay in the fact that it was given to him from elsewhere; it was given, not just 'a given' in that sense.

To be justified by the authority of God, the source of all life and goodness, is justification indeed – though Roman authorities may have wished to claim such divine authority in Caesar. Even then, to be proclaimed 'Son of God' as an emperor is one thing; to be proclaimed 'Son of God' as a Galilean peasant is another altogether. This is the main accusation against him at his trial – "he claimed to be 'Son of God'".

So, inevitably, other people would look to such a one as this to demonstrate his status, his power, his authority – and no wonder they looked for him to perform works of power in order to justify himself.

At the feeding of the 5000, we are told in Mark, the men were arranged in cohorts of hundreds and fifties (the women were not counted) – it is as if they are preparing themselves as an army for a king. The crowd on Palm Sunday welcome him as the expected King Messiah, the Son of David. Even at the end – the thief hanging there on the cross beside him pleads, "Are you not the Christ, save yourself, and us!" How disappointed they all were. How much persuasion did it take to get them to shout for Barabbas?

But Jesus' true power comes through resisting that temptation to act. Rather, it comes by holding fast to a faith in God whose kingdom lies in another realm, another dimension, and taking upon himself, and within himself, the suffering of the world around him to be transformed. So much so, that the Centurion at the foot of the cross can proclaim, "Truly, this man was a Son of God!", recognising something that he too understands of divinity...

... no John Wayne voice, ringing out, "...*the* Son of God", but "a Son of God". What he is saying may not be what we might wish him to say about Jesus as *the* Son of God, it may be something more general, closer to a Roman understanding of divinity wrapped up in a human greatness, but awe is there and he is taken out of himself, out of his normal sphere of comfort, into a place that we might rightly describe as a place of worship.

I think that is worth noting in terms of our understandings of where people on other faith journeys may be in their encounters with Jesus. They may have very real encounters; sometimes they may use similar language to Christian sojourners, but sometimes they may not express themselves in the same terms as we are familiar or comfortable with.

In a similar way, that expression 'Son of Man' was very familiar from the scriptures, especially Ezekiel. Sometimes it is simply used as a general word for a person – as opposed perhaps to an angel rather than an animal – an expression of humanity, very down to earth and about the 'now'.

Sometimes it is used simply to address Ezekiel – one of my sisters was famous in childhood for standing on her chair in Lewis' restaurant and shouting at the waiter, "Man! Man!, bone, in soup!" You get my drift.

But sometimes, as in Daniel, it appears to point to the future, to one who is to come at a time of God's judgement, who will signal an end, or change of things as we know them; as with Jesus saying to Pilate that he will see the 'Son of Man seated at the right hand of power'.

Even that is very much debated these days, as to whether Jesus really associated himself with this future figure, or whether this future hope is to be brought down to what we find in the person of Jesus himself.

So the question comes back to our hopes, the expectations of those of us who now form what was once that future, here on earth... as well as within a Kingdom in another realm that we refer to as heaven.

Those in authority worried about a king, a Son of God. Jesus seems to have been reluctant to give satisfying answers to such questions. The Gospel writers have filled in some of the spaces, but they have done so in different ways, which doesn't make it too easy for us get back to any original conversations or intentions.

What they did know was him was himself! – the fact of an encounter with Jesus, something so overwhelming that it compelled them to try to put into words what that meant both in terms of their own relationship to him, and also in terms of the relationship they believed Jesus had with God and with the world: Where had he come from? – from God! "Listen to him! He is my Son!"

Of course people engaged in other faith journeys may find this offensive. But if we are honest, it takes us a lifetime to come to terms with what we proclaim, for we accept it in faith and wrestle with what we do not fully understand. It will take until eternity for us to agree as the wider Body of Christ within the churches just what we mean by that.

So we meet others along the way and travel in company as and when we can and share what we can. And we continue to learn from one another. This is the nature of God's guidance and it is good.

But we must know to whom we listen first and foremost and seek to follow. And in faith we must trust that we will be led towards resurrection light with him.

Who do you say that I am?

In the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus takes the towel and washes the disciples' feet, and poses the question that Friday evening's 'World Day of Prayer' service was based around, "Do you know what I have done for you?", he asks, You call me 'teacher' and 'Lord' (or 'Master') and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example... for no servant is greater than his master. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."