

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

A group of trainee police officers were once set an exam in which this question came up. 'You are proceeding down the road when you see a house on fire and a woman shouting for help from an upper window. At the same time a bus coming down the road is distracted by the smoke from the fire and crashes down the embankment. A car following the bus skids to a halt and in the melee an escaped convict jumps out and runs off down the street. You are the only policeman at the scene. What would you do?' One of the trainees wrote succinctly: 'On encountering this situation I would carefully remove my uniform and mingle unobtrusively with the crowd.'

In a sceptical culture like ours, we might easily be tempted to 'mingle unobtrusively with the crowd.' It's hard to stand out as a Christian in an unbelieving society. But Jesus' question is addressed to us as much as to the disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?' We can't sit on the fence.

There were two questions actually: 'Who do people say that I am?' 'But who do *you* say that I am?' One of the few sermons I remember from my undergraduate days made a case that for many of us these were the two most important questions we would ever face.

A related question is this: 'So who do we *want* him to be?' Because few people have been so 'put upon' as Jesus, constantly receiving our projections as to the kind of Christ we want.

Do we want him to be a great human teacher? Yes, but more than that. Do we want him to be an all-time winner, one who unerringly zaps the opposition? No, not one who operates that way. How about an innocuous *Life of Brian* figure? Anything but! Then what about a kind of spiritual Zen master, offering comfortable piety to ease our days? No, not really; what we need is more like *uncomfortable* piety.

It's hard for us to let the startling figure of Jesus stand free of our expectations and projections. For every person with one picture of him, there's another with the opposite. Oscar Wilde wrote, 'Christ's place is with the poets. His entire life is the most wonderful of poems.' But a poster I once saw in New Zealand said he was 'a radical, non-violent teacher, a long haired, brown-skinned, homeless, community organising Middle Eastern Jew.' On the other hand Lord Hailsham wrote that he saw 'a laughing, joking Jesus, physically strong and active, fond of good company and a glass of wine, telling funny stories, using paradox and exaggeration, giving nicknames to his friends, and holding his companions spellbound with his talk.'. Poet, community organiser, bon viveur - these are very different images.

So who do you say that he is?

Perhaps one of the problems is that we've made a religion out of Jesus himself, instead of letting his message get us onto the streets where he used to spend his time. We've *worshipped* him rather than *followed* him. Jesus didn't ask for our worship; he invited us to come on a journey into an alternative reality he called the Kingdom of God. And there he took people from the edges of society and put them in the centre of things – lepers, prostitutes, children, tax collectors, the poor, the blind.

A much respected Armenian priest was asked what he thought would happen if Jesus walked into Jerusalem today. He closed his eyes for a moment and then said quietly, 'Jesus would probably do now what he did then: take care of the poor, speak truth to power, and get himself killed.'

Perhaps we'll meet Jesus as we do Jesus-like things.

Who do you say that he is?

Nick Cave is an unusual rock star, a singer-songwriter who often covers dark territory in his songs. He once said in an interview, 'When I started to read the gospels I found myself trembling at the things that Christ said, and at the stories themselves. I was incredibly moved by them. I still am. With the story of Christ you're met with a powerful human being who rages at things, who's desperately unhappy about things, who doubts. At times these things he talks about are shocking, at others utterly baffling, and that's really exciting.'

This isn't gentle Jesus, meek and mild. His distinctive way of living was to let go of ego and self-interest, and *give himself to God and to others*. It was a path of self-emptying; the Greek word is 'kenosis'. He emptied himself in the incarnation. He emptied himself in helping others. He emptied himself most of all on the cross. And he told his hearers (including us) that the only true way to live was to die to ourselves and to give ourselves away, *because only those who lose their lives will save them*. We meet Jesus on the way down the ladder, not on the way up. Being a Christian isn't just about making a few minor adjustments to our normal, comfortable lives. It's about finding a new centre to our lives, and living outwards from that new centre.

'Who do you say that I am?' Still the question haunts us, because it demands a response not just with the head but with the heart and the hands as well.

Peter was getting there at Caesarea Philippi. He saw the Messiah in Jesus but he didn't yet see what that idea really meant. Gradually, however, what he and his friends were coming to realise was that you couldn't separate the man Jesus from his heavenly Father. It was a case of like Father, like Son. His whole life was, pure and simply, an act of God. The real him, his centre, the bit that was most genuinely him, was focused and centred on God. This was the astonishing truth that those disciples were finding they had to come to terms with; that they couldn't speak of Jesus without in some way speaking of God. And that was what pushed the needle into the red zone and led the religious leaders of the day to cry 'Blasphemy' and have him crucified.

What then do we find ourselves saying when we face that sharp question of who Jesus is for us? Who do we say that he is? For myself I would say that I find in Jesus *a life-giver*, who came to give abundance to my daily experiences, to give Life to life. I find *a life-saver*, who defeated the powers of darkness both within and around me, offering peace and hope both to me and to the world. I find *a prophetic teacher* who excites, inspires and challenges me to a deeper concern for the world - and for the next person I meet. I find *a faithful friend* who somehow accompanies me through every experience of joy and sorrow. I find *a risen and ascended Lord* who encompasses this world and the next, and enables me to join the first Christians in their ground-breaking creed 'Jesus is Lord.'

This is what I find in Jesus as he asks me, 'John, who do *you* say that I am?' I agree with Frederick Buechner, one of my favourite Christian writers, who wrote, 'In the last analysis you cannot pontificate, but only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross - and the way he carries me.'"

There's something about him that won't let me go. Not that I want him to. This figure holds and captivates me, disturbs me and challenges me. Who do I say that he is? He's my morning star, my moral compass, my leading light. I find him endlessly fascinating, attractive, enigmatic, compelling and bewildering. My Lord and my God.

Who do you say that he is? It makes a lot of difference how we answer that question. We end up either as followers or merely as observers. I know which one he wants. And I know how much I fail.

But the measure of my faith is how often I get up and try again to follow him.