

You are the Christ
Mark Heath, 22nd Jan 2005
Mark 8:27-33

²⁷And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

We often wonder what people are saying about us behind our backs. Are they complimenting us or criticising us? Or perhaps we flatter ourselves to think that they are talking about us at all. Jesus knew that people would be more free to express their ideas of who he was to his disciples than to his face. So he asks the disciples for a summary of what people thought about him. On the surface, this appeared an easy and interesting question. The disciples could reel off a list of the current theories (and perhaps throw in a few of their own) and then get to hear what Jesus had to say in response.

But Jesus didn't say anything in response to the people's theories. In fact, that wasn't what he was really interested in. His second question is much deeper and gets straight to the heart of the matter - "Who do *you* say that I am?". It is possible for professing believers to be able to talk a great deal about spiritual matters, church and even Jesus himself. They may have a good grasp of theology and be able to discuss the relative merits of different viewpoints. But the question Jesus asked to his disciples is addressed to everyone. He is not interested in hearing us report what Calvin or Neitzche thought of him, but rather he asks what we believe about him.

Truth and Misunderstanding v27-30

Jesus had of course been somewhat elusive about his identity. It would seem that he was not concerned to simply *claim* that he was the Messiah, but to *demonstrate* it. In any case to simply proclaim "I am the Messiah" would have been to provoke the Romans to execute him straight away. Everyone knew that the Jewish Messiah was supposed to lead a revolution against the Roman oppressors and then rule the people of Israel as their king in a glorious new era.

The word "Christ" is simply the Greek word for "Messiah", which means "Anointed One". In the Old Testament, there were three types of people who were anointed – prophets (1 Kings 19:16), priests (Ex 29:7) and kings (2 Sam 5:3). Though many Jews thought of the Messiah simply as a great future king, Jesus would be all three. He would be the last in the great line of prophets, speaking the very words of God and like so many prophets before him, dying a martyr's death in Jerusalem (Matt 23:37). He would be the great high priest, offering himself as a sacrifice once and for all (Heb 7:27). And he would be the a greater King than David, ruling the nations in justice and righteousness (Mark 12:37).

So now was the time to nail their colours to the mast, and it is no surprise that it is Peter who has the guts to say what he believes. "You are the Christ". There was nothing tentative about the way he phrases it. He has become convinced from what he has seen and heard that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised Saviour who would rescue God's people. He may not have fully appreciated what being the "Christ" really was about, but we should not minimise the significance of his statement. In calling Jesus "the Christ", he was doing more with attaching a theological label to a person, like someone might say to Rowan Williams, "you are the Archbishop of Canterbury". By saying that Jesus was the Christ, he was saying that he was ready to follow this man.

Peter believed that the Christ would save the people of Israel. He would be ultimately victorious and his followers would be vindicated and rule with him in the coming kingdom. Peter was now convinced that Jesus was the man to follow. Those who were on his side would surely win even if there was to be a fierce battle with the Romans. Peter was also well aware of what had happened to followers of other would-be Messiahs – they ended up being crucified. So he has reached a point where he is ready to bet his life on following one man.

It is this type of faith that John has in view in 1 John 5:1, which says “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”. Like Peter's confession this is more than ascribing a job description to Jesus, but believing that he alone is the one who can save you, and he alone is the one to follow if you want to end up on the winning side. It is recognising that there can be no neutrality about this man, you are either for him or against him. To speak of *faith* in Jesus without also *following* is meaningless. But there is also to be a growing understanding of who he is – Peter's misconceptions cannot go unchallenged as we shall see shortly.

The Calling of the Christ v31

Now the issue of Jesus being the Christ had come into the open, it was time that the disciples understood what that really entailed. Jesus must suffer, be rejected, be killed and rise again. For Jesus, the name “Christ” was not simply a title but a calling. It would lead him down the darkest and most painful paths imaginable.

He knew that suffering lay ahead. Not just physical pain, but the emotional strain of rejection by those who should have accepted him, desertion by those who should have stood by him and even betrayal by one of his closest friends. This is what the Scriptures prophesied that the Christ would have to endure, and Jesus would not publicly claim to be the Christ without first demonstrating that he was indeed the one who fulfilled these prophecies.

Most specifically, he knew that his mission would result in his own death. He had such an incredibly strong sense of personal vocation and calling on his life that he didn't even shrink from death. This is what the Father had commissioned him to do. Though he believed from the Scriptures that the Father would raise him to life, we shouldn't underestimate what faith that demonstrated. This was the most astonishing level of trust in God and his Word, that he would go to the grave believing he would be raised to life again.

Thank God that our calling is not so hard to follow, and yet there are similarities. Like many in the early church, we may be called to situations involving danger and suffering, and we all must one day face death, with only the promise of resurrection to give us hope. It is crucial that we display the same confident trust in God that Jesus did, if we are to live our lives in total surrender to the will of God like he did.

Speaking for Satan v32,33

We might think that Peter would be in for a commendation from Jesus for his faith and perception, but sadly he ends up being opposed in the strongest of terms. His rebuke of Jesus shows he was *arrogant*. He thought he knew better than the Lord. He was also *disrespectful* – it is one thing to question God, but another to rebuke him. Finally, Jesus points out that he had a *human perspective*. He wanted Jesus to fulfil human agendas and expectations, but Jesus had come to fulfil God's plan of salvation. Seen from God's perspective, Jesus' suffering and death were achieving a greater purpose than Peter could realise.

Why did Jesus rebuke Peter so harshly – even calling him Satan! If someone called me Satan, I would certainly take offence. But Peter needed to know that he was fulfilling Satan's agenda by opposing Jesus. First, Satan wanted to destroy Peter's faith and undermine his relationship with Jesus. Second, Satan wanted to use Peter to divert Jesus from his unswerving determination to do the will of God. Third, Satan was quite happy that Peter's human perspective considered the Romans to be the enemy rather than Satan himself.

Jesus told Peter that he had “set his mind” on the things of man, not on the things of God. As Paul teaches in Col 3:2, the same danger exists for us. Will we set our minds on the things of this world, or will we allow God to educate our thinking through his Word and see things from his perspective?

Conclusion

It is crucial that we know who Jesus is. Vague ideas about him are not good enough, and even theological exactitude about him falls short of saving faith in him. True faith in Jesus does not just say what we think about him but like Peter is ready to trust his leadership, believing that our confidence in him will be proved right. It involves following his example by uncompromisingly obeying the Father's will, whatever the cost. None of us is exempt from difficulties or death, but our faith in God's promise that nothing can separate us from his love (Rom 8:38,39) will sustain us.

It is equally crucial that we let Jesus speak rather than presuming to know best. This involves being willing to let him speak to us through his Word and Spirit, renewing our minds (Rom 12:2) so that our perspective is no longer a worldly one, but a heavenly one. If we do not take this on board, then we could, like Peter, end up doing Satan's work for him. It is a sobering thought that Christians could be used by Satan if they start thinking they know better than Jesus.

In this passage we see both a high and low point in the life of Peter – his bold declaration of faith and his presumptuous correction of his Master. He ends this passage earning himself a rebuke, but thankfully he learned from his mistake. After being filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, he went from strength to strength, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and the Messiah that he now understood so much better. Tradition tells us that he paid the ultimate price for his faith – he was martyred – and will now enjoy the ultimate reward of eternal life. His confidence that Jesus was the Christ was vindicated.