

**Sermon preached on the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**September 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 by**

**the Rev Christopher Wood at St John's Timberhill**

*St Mark chapter 8 v27-35.*

As you know, St Mark's Gospel is the shortest, and it reads as a rather urgent account that's determined to get the important facts of Christ's ministry recorded for those first gatherings and worship that became The Church.

So, in that context, the Gospel that we have just heard begins in a curious way as Our Lord asks his Disciples a slightly odd question, which St Mark clearly thought needed to be remembered and preserved.

I don't think that Our Lord is having an identity crisis when he asks the question, 'Who do people say I am?' But in posing this question about himself he perhaps makes us ask the same question of ourselves.

Personal identity is a very modern issue. It seems to be gaining in importance and people give very different answers when asked who they are. It's not uncommon for some people to describe themselves by their work or profession. In my experience men do this more than women. It is by saying that they are a doctor, a lawyer or a labourer that we can discover all we need to know about them. [Most people are a Manager now]

We can guess at their education and their social background. We might imagine what kind of house they live in and which way they will vote.

Another way in which we identify ourselves is by our relationships. The television programme, 'Who do you think you are?' is very popular because we all want to know where we have come from, and somebody else's history will stimulate an interest in our own story. Nevertheless the immediate relationships we have with those around us, are probably more important than ancestors when determining exactly who we are. To say that you're a daughter, a sister and a mother, and a wife and then to name the relatives, situates you in a particular family from which you give and receive life. The family context also enables you to look to

the future, especially through your children. Or, as I have just returned from a lovely wedding, I should say your Godchildren also.

Of course there are many kinds of relationships which are not only relevant to us in the here and now, and draw on the past, but look towards the future. An obvious one is the relationship between teacher and pupil, but there are lots of others. I'm reminded of Shakespeare's words in Hamlet, "We know what we are but not what we may be." And sometimes we rely on others to see the potential that lies within us.

In answering Our Lord's questions his disciples make several points about his identity. To suggest that he is in fact the same person as our own Patron Saint, St John the Baptist, is an easy mistake to make. We learn from the Fourth Gospel that St John was preaching at the same time as Jesus, and stories about John could easily get mixed up with those of Our Lord in the common sharing of stories at the time. To say he was Elijah suggests that Our Lord is not only a prophet like John but also one who is ushering in the end of time because Elijah, who went to heaven in a fiery chariot, was expected to put in an appearance at the coming of the end of the world. Just being a prophet also says a lot about how God was perceived as speaking through Jesus. But when St Peter said that the Lord was the Christ, the anointed one of God, he was claiming much more.

It was hoped that the Christ would liberate the Jewish people from the oppression they were suffering under occupation from the Romans. That was a clear and obsessive outlook at the time. But Our Blessed Lord was not that kind of liberator. He came to liberate us from sin, both in terms of our actions and the consequences, not least in our hearts and minds, and to make us his people; and that is achieved by following him. Following Christ through thick and thin, living in accordance with his teaching, is not an easy option. How many times in the Gospels do we hear of those who turn away, turn back, when they realize the step and the change that is being asked of them? The prophet Isaiah in to-days first reading gives us an Old Testament flavour of the price of doing God's will when society is listening to a very different drummer.

Christ promises us everlasting life but it is only by losing the one that we have that we will save our own life. Embracing the truth of the Gospel isn't about adding pious bits onto the life and values that people already have. It means living with Christ and that may mean rejection by others just as much today as it meant in Our Lord's own time. By living the

Gospel we will be going against current trends and our values will not be those of other people all the time.

Undoubtedly this means that we will have to stand up for what we believe when we are called upon to do so, and this may provoke a reaction against us. Being a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah, calling people to see truth in the midst of all the views and opinions of the modern world is far from making life easy for yourself, but it is the way to proclaim the Kingdom that we pray for in the Lord's Prayer. That is what giving up our life in order to save it means. No wonder that the first Christians were simply called "Followers of The WAY."

But one thing we can be very clear about is who we are. That can be quite exciting, as there should be no identity crisis for the followers of Jesus Christ. No longer will we be searching for meaning in the dark. We can follow the Christ and know for certain that if we are faithful to him then we have a future that extends..... beyond this life. We can now describe ourselves in a new way. No longer do our profession, our job, postcode, and status or salary matter in the same way. The values of the world have been turned upside down so that we can see the world the right way up, that is .....with the eyes of Jesus Christ.

When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he had learned from reading the Christian Gospels he thoughtfully said " The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." And isn't that about right when we ponder the ways in which people might identify what a follower of CHRIST might look like, and how our values might be different to those of the age and society around us. And what an opportunity we have to live the simple message that there is another way. There are people around us every day in this city who are desperate to know that. We don't have to look far.

So if anyone asks you who you are, you can reply, 'I am a child of the most high God, the brother or sister of Jesus Christ, and I am heir to eternal life'.

That should clear up any questions of identity for them.....and for me..... and for you.

Amen.