



Trinity 16

THE NEW SHOFAR

Who is blind and who chooses to be blind?

Isaiah 50:4-9 - Mark 8:27-38

Who is this Christ of whom Peter speaks?

Immediately prior to the reading from Mark's Gospel for today, Jesus heals a blind man in a most unusual manner (8:22-26). He first of all spits into his eyes and lay hands upon him. But the blind man could only see what appeared to be people *walking around like trees*. Jesus then lays hands on the man again and this time he *sees clearly*. In our reading, Mark has an interaction with Peter reflecting this same twofold process. He first of all asks Peter *who do you say that I am?* Peter answers *You are the Christ*. As it was with the blind man, Peter sees but only sees in a vague manner.

Saying Jesus is the *Messiah* (*Christ* in Greek) could mean a wide range of things. In the Hebrew Bible he is generally understood to be the future monarch from the line of David, the one with a significant role to play when God established the End Time Kingdom. One limitation with this view is that both priests and kings were anointed (the word *Christ* means *the anointed one*). Isaiah even speaks of the pagan King Cyrus of Persia as the one *anointed* by God (and therefore a *messiah* – in Hebrew), ordained to free the people of Israel from exile in Babylon so that they could return home to Jerusalem.

God's Anointed One, the Messiah

Most Jews around the time of the ministry of Jesus would have had an expectation of a messiah along the lines of a Davidic king. Some were looking for an *End Time High Priest* while others were awaiting a *Chief Angel*. At the heart of these hopes was a political hope. The messiah would play a key role in re-establishing the Davidic rule on the throne in Jerusalem. In order to achieve this, he would have impressive military skills as he sets about fulfilling the kind of image reflected in texts such as **Psalm 2**... *He who sits in the heavens laughs; Yahweh has them in derision.* ⁵ *Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,* ⁶ *'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'* With the nation living under brutal Roman rule, anything less than political liberation would be meaningless. God's just rule cannot be established without some kind of violent upheaval... *God will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked* (**Isaiah 11:4**).

It was this military association that laid the foundation for the unsuccessful and ultimately tragic Jewish revolt against Roman rule during the first and second centuries. We even see signs of this false hope in the writing of the New Testament...*So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'* (**Acts 1:6**). Even after the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were still confused as to the meaning of who Jesus was and what he was doing. They would not fully understand until the Spirit had been poured out on them at Pentecost.

And so we can say Peter was half right when he said to Jesus *you are the Christ*. Like the blind man, he could see something of the truth. But he was missing the key part. Jesus was sent to reveal God his Heavenly Father as a *reigning-God*, reigning in a Kingdom of justice, righteousness and mercy.

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Jesus is now on the Way – the way to Jerusalem and crucifixion

Mark tells us how Jesus and his disciples were now *on the way*. They are heading for Caesarea Philippi via the Mount of the Transfiguration and then on down into Galilee. They will pass through various centres before reaching Jericho and then beginning the long walk up to Jerusalem. Mark will use this phrase often during the last half of his Gospel and the most frequent association will be with his death.

They may be on *the Way*, but the disciples stand accused of being as blind as the man the people had brought to him earlier on. When they reply to Jesus' question about his identity, they parrot the common expectations of the time, of the world around them. In quoting the "people" they are voicing their own inner thoughts as well. These are based on the signs and wonders he had worked, on the miracles and exorcisms and on the power of his preaching and teaching. Surely this would be the man to be king over all Israel? The one sent by God to bring in the Age of the Messiah when Jerusalem will once again stand as the Mountain of God, the centre of the earth?

Sadly, nothing could be further from the Truth. Like the blind man, they are completely blind. They want Jesus to be the One sent by God to make the world into an image and expectations they had in their own minds. They turned God's thinking and planning into thoroughly human thoughts. Destroying the Romans and re-establishing a Davidic king in Jerusalem is exactly what they would do!

But what about Peter?

His disciples exhibit blindness but what about Peter? He is at least able to come part way towards the reality of the identity of Jesus – *you are the Christ!* But what is he prepared to allow Jesus to do as the Messiah of God? There is the rub. His words are true, but they need to be filled out a little more. Jesus does this for him by telling him how... *the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* Jesus is the Messiah of God. Jesus is not the Messiah for Peter or simply for Israel.

Peter is spiritually blind, seeing things through a haze. He preaches a Gospel very much in accord with and comfortable within the culturally, religiously, historically and politically conditioned understanding of his own time. His declaration of faith was never going to rock any boats. He would never be called upon to suffer and be martyred for saying what he professed here.

How difficult it is to preach God's Messiah!

The post-Pentecost Church preached the Christ of God, proclaimed the living Messiah and suffered persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom. The world of the time felt threatened, uneasy and under a moral attack by those early missionary men and women. And so they should have been! God's messiah called for the building of a world based on justice, on mercy, on love, fellowship, forgiveness, a world where all are celebrated as God's children and people are ready and willing to lay down their own lives that others may live (with the phrase *laying down their lives* having a wide range of meanings and not just a physical death). Faith was about living others and not simply about personal salvation.

These followers of God's Messiah challenged a world where the rich grew ever richer and the poor ever poorer; a society where some feasted while others starved, some lived in ostentatious splendour with the sick and homeless left begging in their doorways. These disciples of Christ did not limit themselves to praying for the Reign of God to become a reality in their world. They acted on the call, publicly and actively collaborated with the Risen Christ in making God's reign a living force for all.

The question from my teenage R.E. classes is trite but still relevant: *Would there ever be enough evidence to convict me of being a Christian?* Compare that evidence with what Christ demands of us.

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