

Who do you say Jesus is?

Readings: John 1:1-18, Mark 8: 27-30

If you asked people on the street who they think Jesus is they might say he was a good teacher, the King of Kings, a fictitious character no more real than Harry Potter or Zeus, a saviour, or an Easter Bunny Jesus who gives whatever we want. There seems to be a lot of confusion as to who he is.

The question of who Jesus is goes back to his lifetime. In Mark 8 we see that people had wildly different interpretations of who Jesus was. Some people believed him to be John the Baptist, while others thought he was Elijah or one of the prophets. But then Jesus turns to his disciples and very bluntly asks them “who do you say I am?” to which Peter, rather climactically, declares him to be the Messiah. The case is done and dusted, right? But then the story takes a rather curious turn in which Peter denies that Jesus will suffer and die, resulting in Jesus comparing Peter to Satan for having his mind focused on human concerns rather than Godly concerns. What’s going on here?

One of the key features of Mark’s gospel is this idea called the messianic secret. The messianic secret refers to the reoccurring instances of Jesus revealing his power but then warning people not to tell others about him. But why? After all, if Jesus is the one who has come to save Israel why would he keep it a secret when he could be giving so many people hope?

The problem is the inhabitants of first century Palestine had a very clear idea of who the Messiah would be. For them the Messiah would be a mighty military hero who would overthrow the Romans and take up his rightful place as sovereign king. What’s more, when the Messiah took power he would raise his supporters to positions of power and influence. These were simply the cultural assumptions that Jesus knew would be projected onto him if he announced his Messiahship to everyone. He knew that he would fail the peoples’ expectations of Messiahship by dying a criminal’s death, and that people would follow him not because they desired to deny themselves in order to serve the Kingdom of God but because they desired earthly power. Even Jesus’ own disciples were not immune to this mindset. In Matthew 18 the disciples argue over which one of them will be the greatest in Jesus’ kingdom. In Acts 1, one of the first things the disciples ask the resurrected Christ is if he will now finally restore the nation of Israel. Much like Peter still had an earthly view of the Messiah in mind, the disciples are still focused on geo-political concerns and not an inheritance that is, in the words of N.T. Wright, “not Palestine, a small geographical strip in the Middle East... [but] the whole renewed, restored creation... the whole world which is now God’s holy land”¹ In light of these cultural expectations, Paul’s confession that Jesus is Messiah is best understood not as a fully formed understanding of Jesus’ mission, but the beginning of a gradual revealing as to the reality of Jesus’ messiahship. In other words, Christ’s messiahship cannot be understood only in relation to his miracles and power, but must also be understood in relation to his death, resurrection, and teachings.

Of course the disciples were not the only ones to view Jesus through the lens of their culture. During the so-called “Age of Enlightenment” beginning in the 18th century. It became fashionable to be sceptical of supernatural ideas in favour of naturalistic ideas. Writing during this time, philosopher

¹ Wright, N T. *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*. New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, loc1416.

Immanuel Kant viewed Jesus not as the Son of God, but as man who resisted immoral desires and so he is a moral teacher who inspires us to resist immoral desires. Today, if you ask a Buddhist who Jesus is they might say that he is a bodhisattva – an individual who has reached enlightenment and is moved by compassion to help others find the path to enlightenment.

However, the Gospels don't leave these options open to us. The first chapter to John's Gospel outlines basic Christian thought on the identity of Christ.

Jesus is God – v1,2,14,18

One of the central concerns of John's prologue is identifying who Christ is. He is one with God the Father and comes from God the Father. The idea that he is simply a prophet or a good man is not an option open to us.

Jesus shares in God's creative work – v3 & Jesus is light vs darkness (wisdom and goodness vs chaos and danger) – v4,5,9

The second point is that Jesus is linked into God's creative work in the opening chapter of Genesis. In our modern tendency to view this as simply an account of material origins we can lose sight of the fact it's a cosmic battle of good and evil; it's God using order to conquer the chaos of the forces of evil. To link Jesus into this battle shows that Jesus has come to enact God's creative work of order into the chaos of our world.

Jesus is life – v4

One of the errors I think that we have made in the evangelical church is to shrink the Gospel message down to where you go after you die. But I can't help but think that this is only half the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus is concerned as much with life before death as much as life after death, and it is Christ who brings this life and freedom from the chaos of our world.

Jesus is God dwelling amongst humans – v14

The hugely important claim that John makes here is that Jesus is God dwelling among humans. The actual phrase John uses here is God tabernacles with us. Those of us here who are Old Testament buffs will know that the importance of the Tabernacle for the Israelites was that it was where God dwelt amongst His people in a very real way. So when John identifies Jesus with the tabernacle he is saying that he is the new tabernacle or Temple. He is God coming down to the level of a human to teach us what it means to be image bearers of God.

But I want to talk specifically on a much more insidious and common misunderstanding of Jesus. While there are few Christians who would deny that Jesus is God, there are many who try to say well he was essentially a political conservative or a political liberal.

In Nazi Germany, a 600,000 strong Protestant group called the German Christian Movement sought to bring the Church into compliance with Nazi ideology. This was done by placing swastikas next to the cross on altars, using Messiah language to describe Hitler, and altering fundamental church doctrine where it came into conflict with Nazi ideology. Portrayals of Jesus suffering on the cross went out of vogue, with many artists portraying him as a manly warrior instead. Pastor Immanuel Berthold Schairer believed that the traditional Jesus was making the German people effeminate and

that recovering “the real Jesus” would harden them. In 1936, Reich Bishop Ludwig Muller rewrote the Sermon on the Mount in order to make Jesus into a German hero. Matthew 5:4-5 now read: “Happy is he who bears his sufferings like a man; he will find the strength never to despair without courage. Happy is he who is always a good comrade; he will make his way in the world.”²

Now this may be an extreme example and I’m sure some here will be shocked at how the German Protestants could change basic Christian truths like this. But it illustrates how frighteningly easy it can be to view Jesus through a cultural lens instead of a Biblical lens and in the process receiving a distorted image of Jesus. But it’s not just changing Jesus politically that we can fall prey to. Some of us hold to images of Jesus that are fundamentally incorrect. Some of us hold to Jesus as the cosmic teddy bear who will protect us from all suffering, some of us view Jesus as being our boyfriend or our romantic lover. These images may be safer than the Jesus of the Bible, but they will ultimately fail us. The cosmic teddy bear Jesus cannot help us when we lose a loved one or discover we have a terminal illness; for the image that Jesus is our boyfriend, I’m just bitter that he seems to be dating so many girls I’m interested in (no, that’s not true!).

Just recently there was a news article about a controversial statue a homeless person sleeping on a park bench being erected near an upper-class neighbourhood in America. From a distance it looks like any other homeless person, but as you approach the figure huddled in a blanket you notice that he has holes in his feet. It’s Jesus. The statue was relocated to an Episcopalian church after members of the neighbourhood complained that it was inappropriate and sent the wrong message. I don’t see why it was? Doesn’t Jesus emphasise with the lowest in our society. Did Jesus not say “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head?”³

One last unhelpful image I want to address; we sometimes talk about the cost of following Jesus and the way he challenges all of us. This can lead to an image of Jesus as being the cosmic boss who is constantly looking over our shoulder watching us to see if we stuff up. There’s a beautiful episode at the end of John’s Gospel where Jesus appears to Peter, the apostle who had previously denied three times that he knew Jesus. Mirroring Peter’s previous failure, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. It’s a shame that English translations don’t communicate the nuances of the Greek very well. N.T. Wright translates it in a way which I think captures what’s going on quite well. Jesus asks “Peter, do you love me?” (Using a very strong word for love - *agape*). Peter replies “Yes, Master, you know I’m your friend.” Again Jesus asks the question and gets the same response “Yes, Master, you know I’m your friend.” Peter can’t bring himself to say anything stronger, so Jesus says “Peter, are you my friend?” to which Peter affirms that he is. Each time Jesus gives Peter the command to look after and feed his sheep. Jesus meets Peter where he is in his failure and he is essentially saying “If this is where you are at, then this is where we’ll start.”⁴

And this is the image of Jesus we need to get back to – the Jesus who challenges us to be agents of his kingdom, but who also meets with us in our human condition where we are and enables us to be his servants.

² I have written in more detail about the German efforts to recreate Jesus on my blog here: <http://micahdmsusings.blogspot.co.nz/2014/06/jesus-wasnt-conservative-but-he-wasnt.html>

³ Luke 9:58

⁴ Wright, N T. *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*. New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, loc3402.