

Sermon Archive 213

Sunday 16 September, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 8: 27-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I begin with some routine literary-critical notes on the history and style of the gospel written by Mark. No one really knows who Mark was - but the content of the gospel suggests that he (or she) had been talking to Peter - the head disciple. The material reads like an inside job from Peter's perspective. If you read it in one go, the sense of speed - of breathless momentum - is clear. It's trying to get everything down in one quick hit - no time for distraction or pleasantries. It's the earliest of the gospels, and the shortest. Other gospels, written a bit later, included material that had had a little longer to mellow, to emerge, to be remembered, or to be whatever we sometimes call "remembered", but probably should actually call "revised / interpreted / embellished". It's the only one of the gospels not really to have a resurrection ending. It ends with the disciples running from the tomb, confused and frightened about what's happened - whatever it is that's happened. They don't know; they don't say. Mark is early and raw. When Mark writes about Peter realising who Jesus is, describing him as "the Christ", that's a really new, unprocessed idea, being floated in story for the very first time.

Roughly twenty years later, when the gospel writer *Matthew* is having *his* go at the "Jesus story", *he* has Peter saying not just that Jesus is the Christ, but that the Christ means "the Son of the living God". Matthew's Peter has a longer, fuller description of who Jesus is. (Twenty years of further reflection may have been productive.) And Matthew's Jesus responds to Peter's confession in a confident, affirming, thoroughly institution-creative kind of way. He says "yes, that's right, you've got who I am. And on this 'getting of it', we're going to build something. We're going to found an authority in the world; we're going to exercise an expertise in spiritual matters for the people. We're going to put on the power-dressed robes of "knowing what we're talking about". This is like a rock to stand on - a foundation. And now

we've got it, we're all rock solid. Look out! Here comes the church."

But in **Mark's** time, twenty years before, Jesus says none of that. He simply hears Peter's confession - and then he tells all those who are present not to tell anyone.

Does silence seem strange to you? If your gospel character, Jesus, finally had managed to reveal what you yourself believed the whole world needed to know, why would you write him as hushing up the truth?

The first part of the answer comes in what Mark puts next. Next he puts Jesus explaining to the disciples what being the Christ really means. He speaks of suffering and of rejection. He speaks of death and a resurrection that the gospel writer himself didn't include in his gospel because he still didn't know what it meant. In early days, who knows what it means?!

I think Mark's Jesus tells his disciples not to share their knowledge of his being the Christ - because they then, and he even later at the time of writing, don't really know what "being the Christ" really means. Yes, the **word** is correct. The **label** is appropriate - but what does it really mean? Who do **they** say I am? Who do **you** say I am? Beyond words, beyond convenient vocabulary and established descriptions, who am I?

And that, for now, is enough comment about the history and style of the text of the gospel of Mark.

-ooOoo-

Last Thursday, Radio National broadcast an interview that Kathryn Ryan did with Emma Gilkison. The interview was called "the heart of Jesus Valentino". Jesus Valentino was the first child of Emma and her partner Roy. Twelve weeks into the pregnancy, tests revealed that the heart of the child, Jesus Valentino, was growing outside his chest cavity, not within it. The prognosis, obviously, was not good. It was described by the experts as "life limiting". Kathryn asked Emma a number of questions about decisions that she and Roy had had to make along the process. In short, their decision was to continue the pregnancy, to act as a family of three, two ex-utero, one in-utero, and to gather experiences together. To the alarm of her medical people, Emma went off to Tonga to swim with whales - because she thought that that would be a good thing to do with her baby. They celebrated a one-

month-before-due-date birthday, because they knew the standard birthday arrangement of one year after birth wouldn't work. Emma and Roy basically moved all the family activities that would have occurred later, to times earlier, and to make of them memories. After his birth, Emma and Roy loved their ex-utero son for 15 days.

Speaking of her grief, Emma said:

"It's a particular kind of grief. It can also be a little bit more difficult because you don't know who your baby was going to become. You know, you don't know what their favourite kind of food was going to be, or what age they would have learned to walk. So even though you're intensely close to them during pregnancy when you're sharing your blood and your cells and you have an intensely close physical experience, you don't necessarily know who they are, so it can be hard to channel your grief, I suppose."

Love, even though we don't know who we are. Love, even though the story of the formation of the full person isn't done yet. Love, even though we don't yet know how to begin to answer the question "who do you say I am?"

Mark's Jesus hears Peter give a good answer to "who do you say I am". Mark's Jesus hears that the words are correct. Mark's Jesus knows, though, that we don't yet possess the capacity to describe who we are. So Mark's Jesus cautions quiet, and calls the disciples instead to live with him a little longer, while they walk through things like rejection, becoming, death, and the mystery of resurrection. Walk a little further with this slowly revealed work in divinely-loved progress.

I was baptised in the third month of my life. My parents took me along to St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Howick, where I was baptised by Arthur Maddock in the presence of the Presbyterian faithful of Howick. Neither my parents, nor I, nor Arthur Maddock, nor the people of Howick, had the faintest idea of who was being baptised. Who do they say I am? No one knew - nor could know - maybe other than the God who called for me to be surrounded by the love of family and Christian community.

At one point, I was a childish maker of cardboard houses for plastic characters that came from cereal boxes. At one time, I was the number one candidate to be the husband of Rosemary, and the father of all her children. At one time, I was a black draped Goth. At another, I was a guy on a big noisy motorbike. At another, I was the minister of St Stephen's in Macquarie Street and a member of the Australia Club. At another, I was a poor confused person adrift. On the journey, who do they say I am? It's a question that calls us to a deeper questioning of the growing and claiming of the human person by the God who wants to do a miracle.

To the question "who do you say I am", Mark's Jesus hears an answer that is right, technically. In the classical framework of the hopes and culture of the people, the answer's correct. Then he calls for the people not to speak any further - but to follow him a wee bit more, while he walks a whole lot more, through the forces of formation - things like rejection, isolation, on-going reflection of those who love us, dying, rising. And then, maybe even after the official gospel record is completed and set in paper, ink, stone and dross - only then to dare to answer the question "who are we?"

As I was very late in 1963, so today Nate and Nina have been baptised in the sight of a community of faith. Who are they? Who will they become? I think the Spirit of God cautions us not to race to an answer. The Spirit of God, however, dares us to believe that they, and that we all, are profoundly loved - and that it is in love that our true selves come forth.

-ooOoo-

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages around and about. And on the way - as he walked with them - he asked them "who do people say that I am?" As he walked with them - who do you say I am?

A moment of quiet.