# Morningside Sermon 10.30am 13/9/15

# Who am I?

*Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38*

How are you known? What are your distinguishing features? Is your voice recognisable? Do you have a certain style with what you wear? Have you a signature perfume? Do you have a distinctive walk?

The question of identity has always been an important one. From the moment we are born we see how babies grow into children and then grow into adulthood. We look at the way they behave; we see the impact of nature and nurture on their lives. We look at the influences that shape for good or ill. We see character developing.

As a minister I spend a fair bit of time assessing character and looking at personality professionally. When couples come preparing to get married, one of the games I like to get them to do as an exercise is to go away, work out the three things that they really love about their partner, and then tell them. Passing on affirmation and appreciation to the person you love is something many people find awkward and embarrassing. Maybe it’s a British thing. To say to someone why you love them and that they matter to you, and mean it, is one of the ways you build a relationship. It is called cherishing.

Alongside the three affirming things I ask couples to define I ask them to identify the one thing they will want to have changed about their partner after their first married year together. Three things that you really love, one thing you’d really want to change. There’s something for all you couples out there. I’m available for counselling afterwards.

The point is it helps us work out who people are. It reveals how much we observe about their personality and habits. It shows how comfortable we are about praising and appreciating, and perhaps also how we cope with differences and conflict. It helps us answer questions like, ‘Who am I?” just as much as it answers questions like, ‘Who are you?”

At the other end of the spectrum when I sit with families putting together a tribute or eulogy for a funeral service, it is often challenging to get people to talk about the person who has died. How could you or should you sum up someone you’ve known all your life? What words can be used to give a description of someone you’ve lived with, fought with, shared a home with, maybe started a family with? But it matters. It matters to put a life into perspective, and to remember with thanks, or with sadness, with regret, or even with relief, the life that has gone. What would you want to have remembered about you? Not just what you did, or what jobs you may have had, or people you may have known, but what you were like as a person. What made you special, or memorable, what made you intrinsically human, flawed as well as fabulous.

What, then, would we make of Jesus’ question when He asked of His disciples who others, and they themselves, thought He was? If Jesus were to ask you, “Who am I?” – what would you have replied?

The point we have reached in Mark’s gospel is about halfway through Jesus’ ministry. He has done much and said much, and His disciples have been with Him all the way through. Jesus wants to know how much they understand, and what they believe. If His message is going to continue through them, what have the people who have been closest to Him really grasped about Who He was and what He had come to do?

All along the disciples had demonstrated little insight to what was happening. Jesus is recorded as fairly often saying with mounting frustration, “Don’t you yet understand?” They had seen and listened, they had observed and been around Him. It was time to get real and state what they thought and believed.

We are so blasé about calling Jesus ‘Christ’, it’s even a kind of swear word for many, but what Peter calls Jesus is truly astonishing. The Messiah, the Christ, the One chosen by God to reveal to the world what God is and what God intends. It is radical, truly radical. The great God, of far-away, and up-there; the great God Who does incredible things in what was, even for the people of Jesus’ day so long ago it was myth and legend, is actually here and now, right there in front of them.

The question for us, as for them, is what do we call Jesus? Who do we say that He is? I can’t begin to tell you how much that matters. On the basis of Your relationship with Jesus, on the basis of what You have come to know of Him from what the Bible says, and from what You have seen people of faith inspired by Him doing in is Name, what is Your assessment of Who He is?

Is He the Christ and Messiah, the anointed One of God. Is He Saviour and Lord? Is He Master or Teacher or Prophet, or Healer or Inspirer, or Comforter? Do you even call Him your Friend?

Be in no doubt that we are dealing with a real, historical figure, attested to not only by the Bible but by Jewish and Roman historians of the time. But Jesus is more than that. I don’t know of any other figures from the C1st AD Who has had as much written about Him within years of His life and death. We know more about the sayings of Jesus than we know about Julius Caesar.

What to You judge His character to be? If you were to say the three things that you absolutely loved about Him, what would they be? If there was one thing that you would presumptuously want to change about Him, what would that be? His first followers certainly wanted to change all the talk about death and suffering. That wasn’t in their picture of what God’s chosen One was about.

But Jesus said ‘no’. He had come to suffer, because He loved; and die, because He loved. And – well – what next? Come again? Stay with? Remain constant? Change lives? Give hope? Be there?

When we come to speak and think about Jesus we need to do so with the humility and the reserve that comes from awareness that we may have the title right but may not fully understand its meaning. What does it mean for us if we call Him Saviour? What does it mean for us if we call Him Son of God? What does it mean for us if we too call Him Messiah?

I believe many people shy away from thinking about Jesus or talking about Jesus because they are afraid that they might come up with the wrong answer. Especially if they’ve been a Christian for a long time. We don’t like talking about our faith, or the One Who inspires it. We’re nervous or embarrassed in case we get it wrong, are realise that we haven’t quite grasped it all. I heard a professor of theology wriggling over these same issues just a few days ago. We look to be told, we look for neat, easily digestible and intelligible answers, and when we don’t get something manageable, we look away, disappointed, or embarrassed, or worse; we walk away because we think if we don’t believe it can’t be true. If we don’t have the words and the ideas and the philosophy, we somehow won’t measure up to what we believe Jesus expects of us.

Jesus asks, “Who do YOU say that I am?” and He waits for us to give it our best shot. He waits for us to say some words; He waits for us to do some things if the words don’t come to show what it is that our inarticulate faith actually means. He sees through the shyness, and the doubt, and the fear, even the wilful ignorance at time: to where our hearts are, and our hands are, and where our actions are. To see if we’ve got it. To see if we’ve got Him.

Though He might sometimes be exasperated, just as He was with His first followers, He does not give up. He does not walk away. He comes back again and again and again. In the sure hope and belief that at some point, the penny will drop, and we will see Him for Who He is and what He is. Not just the Son of God, but our Friend. Not just a distant, perplexing God we can barely make out, but an up close and personal Friend Who waits and listens, and understands and loves.

Jesus waits for us to enter into that vibrant, wrestling, uncertain, assured, moving, dynamic, twisting, comforting relationship that we would have with any real person.

“Who do YOU say that I am?” Let today be the today when you start coming up with some answers, however faltering. He’s dying to hear from you. He died to hear from you. He’s still waiting; He’s still listening.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**