

Mark 8 (27-38)

A little boy at Sunday school was asked to draw a picture of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus on their flight into Egypt. – fleeing from murderous King Herod. So the little boy carefully draws a picture of a huge airplane and, when the teacher asks him what it is, he points out that it's "the flight into Egypt," pointing to Mary Joseph, and the baby Jesus who are passengers in business class. "But who's that?" asks the teacher, pointing to this very shadowy figure in the cockpit. Growing a bit tired of all the stupid questions, the little boy says, "That's Pontius Pilot."

But it's not only five-year-olds who misunderstand what Christianity's about. It's my conviction that there are millions of people in this country who've rejected what they think is Christianity, but who've really rejected only a pale imitation of the real thing.

Perhaps one of the best Christian thinkers around at the moment is a man called Tim Keller- his book *The Reason For God* – is set to become a modern classic And his new book is all about Mark's gospel – and he's called *Kings Cross* and he starts like this:

You may know King's Cross as a railway station in London, England, one that has been immortalized in the Harry Potter books. But it's such a perfect encapsulation of the meaning of Jesus' life that I couldn't resist borrowing it for the title of this book. Mark's account of Jesus' life is presented to us in two symmetrical acts: his identity as King over all things (chapters 1-8), and his purpose in dying on the cross (chapters 9-16): two parts ("The King" and "The Cross").

That's a brilliant summary of how Mark has crafted his gospel – and our reading today is the hinge on which the 2 halves of the gospel swing – it's all structured around Mark 8(29).

WHO IS JESUS?

The big question that has dominated the book of Mark up to chapter 8 is about the identity of Jesus – who is He? Put it another way - Christianity is not about a what - but about a who? We the readers, are already in the know Mark has told us in the very first verse, - this is a book about Jesus Christ, "the Son of God." But the fact is that the disciples don't know what we know. And so we follow them - watching as they try to make sense of this man. They're forced to ask some big questions – as we've seen week by week. They watch him calming a huge storm, curing incurable illness, bringing a little girl back from the dead. They even hear him claiming to be able to forgive sin – unthinkable - And yet they don't come up with the obvious answer: that this is God's Anointed One, the Christ, the Son of God, – as Tim Keller puts "God's king over all things". The disciples were expecting it, were desperately hoping for it, but now that he's there, standing right in front of them, they just don't see it.

You've probably seen this "trick" picture – it's a picture of a beautiful young woman that can also look like a hideous old hag.

Show the picture.

I have to admit that I had to stare at it for ages before I could see the beautiful young woman. All I saw was the hideous old hag. All the amateur psychologists out there could probably tell me a lot about myself from that fact.

But in a similar way, Jesus also had two faces: the human and the divine. The two were obvious, they were there for all to see, but even though the disciples had stared and stared for several years, all they could see was the man. They couldn't see the divine face of Christ.

But here, in v29 for the first time, there is an indication that they know *who* Jesus is:

Jesus asks his disciples 'Who do people say I am?'

That's a fairly safe question. It's a starter for ten, a bit like me asking you, 'Who won the last election?'

They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

Then Jesus asks a more uncomfortable question:

'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

There's a big difference between me asking you 'Who won the last election?' and me asking you, 'How did you vote in that election?' It's a personal question, and the answer tells me something about you. Jesus' question is THE pivotal moment in Mark's Gospel, a moment in which Mark asks his readers to answer the same question: *Who do you say Jesus is?*

Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.'

This word 'Christ' has big implications. It means 'God's Anointed One'; it's a title of supreme authority, Peter is saying that Jesus is THE ultimate King, the one promised in the Bible.

What did Jesus come to do?

If Jesus wants everyone to know who he truly is, why on earth does he tell the disciples not to tell anyone? It's because, Jesus knows that the disciples still have some learning to do about who he is and NOW what he's come to do: as we see in vv31-33.

Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

It's not enough simply to know about Jesus' identity. Peter's beginning to get it right here. But when it comes to the question of what Jesus came to do, Peter gets it horribly wrong.

When Mark says 'He then began to teach' he's saying this is new stuff – we haven't heard before.

Jesus must suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities, die, and after three days rise again. *That's* what he has come to do. The Bible predicted it, and Jesus knows perfectly well that he has to go to the cross – why – for you and for me.

But Peter has his image of Jesus as King so clearly in his mind that it seems totally crazy to him that Jesus would have to die. He takes him aside and gives him a pep talk. How on earth can a King bring in his kingdom by *dying!* That's ridiculous. But Jesus says no Peter.

'You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'

I don't blame Peter for thinking like this. After all, there are two ways of looking at the cross. There is tremendous weakness Jesus seems exposed, humiliated, and defeated – a failure. From the human point of view.

A king should be on a throne, not a cross. But what about the "things of God" The cross is God's rescue plan. We can see that Jesus chooses to be separated from God so that we never have to be. From God's perspective, this is not weakness. In fact, there has never been a more powerful moment in history. And that's the road that Jesus' sets out on in the 2nd half of Mark.