

16 September 2018

Whitsuntide 17

St Mark 8: 27 - 38

In the small villages of Wales there is an ancient tradition of identifying someone by their last name and their occupation, or sometimes their personality. The tradition makes sense because there are so many people who share the same family name. So, it is Evans the Post to distinguish him from Evans the Butcher, and Evans the Antique. Jones the vegetables is quite different from Jones the Stamp. One is a gardener, the other Mr Jones collects postage stamps as a hobby. Thomas the Teacher and Thomas the Piano. Even if you and I don't fully understand it, it works for them. In these small village, the system immediately identifies individuals. It may be confusing for us, but it works for them.

It is something we see in the Gospels. Jesus was a common name in ancient Israel, and for the most part family names were not part of their tradition. In fact, there is only one last name in the Gospels, and it is Judas Iscariot, and even that isn't correct because Iscariot means assassin or killer - Judas the man who betrayed Jesus.

It is for this reason that we find many different ways of separating Jesus of the Gospels from all the other men with the same name. So, we find the description: Jesus son of David, Jesus son of God, Jesus son of Man, Jesus son of Mary, Jesus the son of the carpenter Joseph, among them.

With that in mind, we turn to our Gospel lesson where Jesus is conducting an informal opinion pole among his disciples. Who do people say I am? No, he doesn't want to know His given name, but more precisely, he wanted to know how people were describing and indentifying him.

The disciples tell him, some of the people think you are John the Baptist, others say you are Elijah, and still others say you are one of the prophets. But John had been beheaded, and Elijah and the other prophets of the Old Testament had been dead for centuries. Only a conspiracy theorist would have believed that John had somehow been smuggled out of the clutches of Herod and escaped to the north country. Then again, there are people who believe all sorts of things. And it is highly unlike that people believed the long dead Elijah and prophets had risen from their tombs. Very likely, it was short-hand speech for saying that Jesus was just like the men who had preceded him.

Today we find that in sports. A young great basketball player is compared to Michael Jordan. A skilled hockey player is another Gordie Howe or Wayne Gretzky. A baseball play might be described as having a swing like Babe Ruth, and so on.

Jesus personalizes it by asking, who do you say I am? In other words, tell me what you think about me, about our relationship, how you have come to know me.

Peter, St Mark tells us, said, "I believe, we believe, you are the Messiah."

Now, we have a real challenge as we look more closely at the word messiah, and it is important that we do explore it. In Hebrew, the word messiah was used to describe a king, a great general over the army, or other leader. It is messiah with a lower case first letter "m". Every time a new king was crowned, they had hopes that this man would keep Israel free from invasion, make certain the people were safe, maintain law and order, and usher in prosperity. At other times, I am sure they sighed deeply and thought, well, perhaps next time. All of these lower case messiahs were secular leaders.

It's something we understand at each election, or whenever there is a change.

The other meaning of the word Messiah, this time with an upper case "M" is the one with which we are familiar - Jesus. Peter is using the upper case "M" - A great spiritual leader, a man of tremendous faith and power who touched the lives of others, and the only one who could so thoroughly triumph over death that St Paul describes him as the pioneer of our faith leading us to the promised land of eternal life.

But from where did Peter and the others get this idea? Not from books, because the Gospels had not been written, nor from the epistles. Nor were they religious scholars. So, how then did Peter come to this conclusion and make such a bold statement? That had to come from God, by way of seeing Jesus in action.

We must personalize this by asking, "Who do I say Jesus is? How do I define him? What is my relationship with him?" We have to do this before almost anything else because how we define Jesus leads into the action we take. Only when we engage in this lifelong spiritual safari do we have a deepening relationship with Him. It is never easy; it never ends.

Those of you who attended a brief meeting last Sunday on an introduction to spiritual direction probably realized that it is not only a life-long exploration, but it constantly evolves, and sometimes radically shifts.

For some of us, it probably began when we were youngsters and learned a few basic prayers - a table grace, a prayer before bed, and memorized the Lord's Prayer. We learned songs in Sunday school. Good. A good beginning. But would you be happy if your faith and relationship stopped when you were still in elementary school? Probably not.

We began reading and studying the Bible, and as we read, mental images began forming in our minds. We could imagine what Jesus looked like, or could see snap shots or home movies of some of the events. We could imagine being on the road with Jesus, listening to Him, seeing Him in action. But every time we think we had something large or small settled, we were caught by surprise. We learned something new.

I believe that is a good thing. It is an absolute blessing from a very loving God. Living in confusion and chaos and ambiguity is rarely easy, but for those who dare embrace and rejoice in it, it is a wonderful blessing to be treasured. And like all blessings, to be used.

You see, it means the entire universe, all that is seen and unseen, known and yet to be known, is our classroom, and everything and everyone helps us know Jesus better. Everything we see and hear amplifies the Gospel in one way or another. It lifts us up and inspires us. We find it in biographies and literature among other places.

Where we see it best in the lives and stories of others. In the magazine section of last Sunday's New York Times newspaper there was an article about teachers who have to take a second job to make ends meet. They have a college degree, many of them a master's degree, and they would be far better off financially if they changed professions. Even if it means a second job, they do it because they know the work they do in the classrooms is even more important. In a very real sense, it is their call to vocation, and the second job to afford remaining a teacher is their cross.

It's the classroom aides and lunch ladies and janitors who not only have a list of tasks to perform, but a heart to care for the young man or woman who is lonely, hungry, and hurting. Perhaps a child too ashamed to say they can't read out loud in class, or that they are homeless, or there wasn't money to meet basic needs. And they care for them as best they can.

I see it every time I walk into Grace of Douglas. The aides, the housekeeping staff, the people who cook, serve, and clean up in the dining room. It's their compassion for the residents. They don't have to smile, talk, and spend time with the residents. It isn't in the job description; their care is their vocation. It isn't their job to visit a resident when family members don't come, or when old friends or neighbours don't think to send so much as a Christmas card. But these care-givers go beyond the job description and do care.

Above all, it's a humbling experience when I stop at the fire hall as their chaplain. They volunteered for this part time work as fire fighters and First Responders, and they get an hourly salary when their squad is on duty or when there is a call. Constant training, and every time their pager goes off, they respond because someone is in trouble and needs them. And I assure you, there is a lump in the throat of their significant other when the pager sounds because they know it could be dangerous work.

They are with people at the worst moments of their life - a fire, an accident, a death, a serious injury. Those men and women have seen men and women ripped as if they were in combat. And they have seen and been with loved ones whose lives are falling apart as they try to save the life of a victim. They've seen tragedies caused by utter stupidity and carelessness

They don't do it for the adrenalin rush of the sirens and light. They do it because their work is as sacred a calling as anything else in the world. After a call they return back to the station and hang up their uniforms. Sometimes there is a little banter to break the tension; sometimes it is very quiet because all of them know they have to go home and put on a brave face to re-assure their own family.

We learn more about God from our conversations and experiences with us. Sometimes we learn more from the school janitor than the principals; more from the lunch lady than any book can provide. From them we learn and see what it is like to have a true servant's heart and follow Jesus even if there isn't a lot of God-talk. More than that, we learn from them what it means to pick up their cross and follow Jesus, and like Him, to live for others and be a living sacrifice that is acceptable to God.

We learn from all of them - all of these wonderful resources - so that we come to know more about Jesus, and far more importantly, to have our own sense of calling and vocation. It is only when we open our eyes and hearts to not just the chapters and verses of the Bible, but the living lessons today, and then take time to meditate and reflect on those lessons, that we begin to discern and understand the work to which Jesus is calling us.

And then, we do it. If we don't do it, if we justify we can't do it because we're too busy studying, praying, and meditating, we become narcissist and stay focused only on ourselves. The message of Christ is to grow in the Lord, and then be part of the community - communal participation, communal service.

In the coming weeks we'll be exploring this more fully as a parish family, and you are all invited to be part of the show.

In the meantime, I have an assignment for you. If you are willing, and I hope you are, I am asking that you become my eyes and ears. When you learn of someone in need, let me know. Simple as that. I'd rather have ten or twenty calls about someone who is in need, than none.

Meanwhile, while you are keeping your eyes and ears open, let's have some real fun.

You and I know this world is getting increasingly angry and divisive, so let's do something dangerously radical. Hold a door open for someone. Let the other driver cut in ahead of you or cross the intersection first. Say hello to people you see on the street and when appropriate, give a compliment, and if not that, say something nice. Smile at people, and if nothing else revel in knowing that it will confuse them, and they'll wonder just what you are up to. Small stuff? Perhaps, but I don't think so because it takes just a small nudge to get a pendulum to reverse direction. We can nudge and shove it from hate to respect, and give it a good push toward the side of love. Let children see that there are grownups who act their age and refuse to engage in our national past time of being rude and mean. Let them, and others experience love in action rather than left to feel that they are invisible and don't matter. A smile, saying hello, acknowledging others doesn't cost us a penny, but it begins to create compound interest that pays a huge dividend.

It has to start somewhere, and it might as well begin right here. Love has to begin somewhere, so it can start here, and in the end love always triumphs over hate. And to be instruments of love, care, and compassion - that is our cross to pick up and carry as we follow Jesus.