

**SERMON: Sunday – 12 September 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**Who do you say that I am?**

**James 3:1-12**

**Mark 8:27-38**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.  
(Psalm 19:14)

Who do you say that I am?

We say so much to others by the way we present ourselves.

Remember the words of Francis of Assisi who encouraged his fellow followers of Jesus to go and preach the good news and use words only if necessary. In other words, show your faith in your actions, in how you live and in what you do.

You can't read the letter of James and not shudder a bit over his stark words about how we use words. And it's so true to say that the tongue can be the cause of great troubles. James calls the tongue a restless evil, full of deadly poison. No one can tame it. On the one hand we use our tongues to praise God and on the other we use it to curse other people who, like us, are also made in God's image.

(SLIDE) In chapter 2 the Message translation has James saying "Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?"

I wonder that as a minister in the church I might easily fall into that trap of too often using God-talk without God-acts.

No wonder some respond by taking a vow of silence. But that's not the only response. All of us though can choose to be careful about how we speak and be mindful of what we say.

And elsewhere in the Scriptures there is no shortage of advice on how we should speak and how words should be used.

(SLIDE) Consider Proverbs 10:19:  
he who holds his tongue is wise.

Or Proverbs 14:3:

A fool's mouth lashes out with pride,  
but the lips of the wise protect them.

(SLIDE) Proverbs 15:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

The soothing tongue is a tree of life,  
but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

The lips of the wise spread knowledge,  
but the hearts of fools are not upright.

Or Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

if I speak in the tongues of angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

According to Paul it is love then that is the real test. Is what is said, said out of love and in love?

If only we could pause before we speak and ask ourselves, is what I'm about to say, the loving thing to say?

Peter, that impetuous follower of Jesus who we encounter today in the Gospel reading didn't always say the right thing let alone the loving thing.

But life with Jesus, and seeing his Messiah die and rise, taught him a different way, so that near the end of his life he was able to write,

(SLIDE)

Whoever would love life  
and see good days  
must keep their tongue from evil  
and their lips from deceitful speech

(1 Peter 3:10)

Jesus asked his friends, who do people say I am?, and he got a mix of answers, just as would happen if he were to ask it today.

Some said he was ....

But who do you say I am?

I've never really thought of that this way before but I want to point to Jesus raising the question about it not being enough just to be seen to be saying the right words without one's actions matching up to what is said.

Peter might seem to give the right answer when others didn't. Yes Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ but he was, and is, the Christ who suffers and dies with and for his people as opposed to the Christ who is ever triumphant over all.

Now don't get me wrong. I know all about the Christ Triumphant theology which has been with us for centuries. And I don't doubt that the kingdom of God and Christ will reign over all in the end. But the way we get there is not the way the world thinks.

Peter's words of a Messiah pointed to a Messiah of all conquering glory rather than the way of suffering.

Hence Jesus rebukes him with a "Get behind me, Satan!". "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (Mark 8:33).

DT - "Instead of praising Peter's prophetic answer, Jesus tells him to keep his mouth shut, and launches into a grim description of the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem.

Poor Peter. Where does he go wrong?

Well, he gets the "answer" right. The title. The identity. "You are the Messiah." But when Jesus challenges Peter's understanding of what Messiah-ship actually entails, Peter cringes in embarrassment. In disbelief. In shame. As in: "No, that's not what I signed up for. That's not how I want my Messiah to behave. Torture? Crucifixion? Humiliation? What kind of Messiah chooses to give up? To surrender? To die? You want me to associate myself with you, and lose everything?"

Peter's profession of faith — impressive though it sounds — signals the mere beginning of his spiritual journey. Not its end. As soon as Peter thinks he has Jesus nailed down, Jesus shuts him up, challenges what he knows, and nudges him back to the starting line: "Yes, I am the Messiah. No, you have no idea what "Messiah" means. In fact, you're not even ready to know what 'Messiah' means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. You still want to mould me into your image of Messiah-ship. You still want to be in control. You still idolise your own comfort. You're ashamed to identify with the Saviour I really am; you want someone more glamorous, more impressive, more aligned with your own definitions of power and greatness. Peter, there's so much more for you to learn."

What about us? Do we have our own agenda when it comes to what Messiah-ship means? An agenda shaped around our own comfort? Our own lifestyle? Our own priorities and preferences? Do we look away in embarrassment when God challenges that agenda? Would we prefer a Messiah who aligns more easily with our social milieu, our political norms, our cultural expectations, our spiritual goals? Is the Jesus we follow a Jesus who

dislikes the same people we dislike? Values the same comforts we value? Cherishes the same life goals we cherish? Or is he the Jesus who once made Peter flinch in shame? The Jesus of humility and surrender? Self-denial and sacrifice? Death and resurrection?

Who we think Jesus is will determine how far we'll go in following him. How large or tiny a cross we'll bear in his name. How fearlessly we'll profess him to a world that needs the love and healing he offers. How humbly we'll repent of the church's failures, and begin again to be Christ's hands and feet to those in need. How boldly we'll dedicate ourselves to sharing the paradoxical gospel of the cross, the grave, and the empty tomb."

Jesus offers the corrective words to the Peter tendency we all have towards triumphalism when he says,

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Not the path of upward mobility but the path of servanthood and downward mobility which identifies with the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the dispirited and the disempowered.

I finish with some words, though perhaps silence would be more appropriate, words I wrote in a journal some time ago, I don't remember where they came from or who wrote them:

(SLIDE)

Out of my not knowing comes the knowing  
Out of my silence comes the speaking  
Out of my stillness comes the action  
Out of my emptiness comes the fullness  
Out of my solitude comes the communion