

“Defining Jesus” – Mk 8:27-38 – Sept 16/12

You have to love the disciples as shown to us by the author of the Gospel According to Mark. For John, the disciples are just this side of Wisdom personified, capable of listening and comprehending the most torturous monologues of Jesus. In Luke’s eyes the disciples are both the perfect followers and evangelists, while Matthew tends to see them as the core of the faithful. But Mark – ah yes, Mark – reveals to us disciples who are totally and completely human, vulnerable as we all are of almost getting it, of almost understanding.

Take today’s reading for an example. Jesus asks his closest followers a couple of fairly innocent questions, one about how others see him and one about how they see him. Their answers seem pretty much ok, but when Jesus goes on to give them a better picture of who he really is, Peter steps up and “steps in it” and is harshly rebuked. It doesn’t take much imagination to feel Peter’s shame, and anguish, and embarrassment, and anger. After all, hadn’t he just given the right answer, once again we might add? But when he gave his answer the Teacher had gone a little bit funny, and so Peter, star pupil of the group, quietly brought that to his attention in private. What thanks did he get? No thanks at all, but instead he was deliberately berated in front of the others! Peter must have wondered, “How could he do this to me?”

How, indeed? How could Jesus have attacked Peter so viciously, turning on him in public, ripping him apart with such humiliation, even calling him an evil one? I believe it had everything to do with the importance of this moment, this critical point at which everything changes, where Jesus’ ministry takes an abrupt turn towards Jerusalem, and towards the staggering events that will happen there.

After all, up until now everything has been fairly rosy for Jesus and his band of followers. From a modest start in the Jordan River his mission and ministry grew steadily, as one by one and two by two Jesus called particular people into close association, to become not merely his students and followers but the core upon which he would rely. The crowds spontaneously assembled to hear him preach and teach, gathering to be fed on his miracles and on his words. The adoring crowds brought to Jesus those who were in need, and they watched him heal their sick, making the deaf to hear and the lame to walk and the blind to see, and even those with eyes could begin to see the power of God at work in him. Even the disciples thought they could see clearly who this strange man was, and what a glorious future lay before him. Evidently they already thought they could define him with one word – “messiah.”

But Jesus knew differently. Jesus knew with great clarity and certainty the path that was laid out for him to follow. Jesus could see plainly all the way to Jerusalem, to his betrayal and trial, to a painful death on a cross, and even to the glories beyond. And so Jesus calls them to come closer and opens this most serious of discussions with a seemingly innocent question, “who do people say that I am?” Who indeed? Certainly there must have been a flood of answers, as people tried to define this unusual man. The more trivial definitions have been lost; the more serious and relevant ones stand out like flags: some say “John the Baptist”, whose fame and reputation continued to spread long after his death in prison; others say Elijah, returned from Heaven, and yet others say one of the prophets, also risen from being long dead. These are all good answers, none of them to be sneered at or mocked. Jesus, who so clearly displayed the power of God present and at work in him just had to be one of God’s special people.

Now those may be fine answers for the people at large to give, but his students and disciples should know better, and they seem to. “But who do you say that I am?” Jesus persists, giving a hint that their answer should be more significant, more meaningful, and closer to the

truth. You can almost hear a bit of hesitation, maybe a whispered consultation among them as his star students seek for the answer they know he already has in mind. As usual, it is Peter who steps forward to take the risk: “you are the Messiah” he offers. The Anointed One, the chosen one of God promised to come and rule God’s kingdom. Peter sees Jesus as the one with clear power and might, who would enforce the rules of the kingdom with majesty and sternness and severity, ruling with the unquestioned and unquestionable power and authority of God himself. All of that power, and authority, and responsibility for judgment dripping from that one word like the anointing oil running down the forehead of the christos, the messiah, the chosen one.

That was the opening that Jesus sought, and used as a teaching moment, as he began to outline to them what he could see down the road, namely a painful path that would lead to the Son of Man being subject to great suffering, rejection, even death, but after three days rise again. And he did not spare his disciples, using soft words and hushed whispers. “He said all this quite openly”, discussing it like it was the most natural thing in the world, seemingly oblivious to the mind-bending contrast that this horrible picture made with the disciples’ images of power and glory.

The disciples were stunned! How could he talk this way?! How could he begin to imagine that such horrible things would or could happen to him, when he clearly was so powerful that nothing could harm him? Could he not see that with such incredible, such divine power in him he was like a god, he was like God himself, and was above and beyond being hurt, let alone being killed. And so it was no surprise that Peter, de facto leader of the band of students, takes Jesus by the arm and lead him off to one side. “What are you thinking?!” Peter begins, boldly taking it upon himself to rebuke the teacher, to bring Jesus back to whom Peter thought he should be.

Shocking, isn’t it? We can barely imagine anyone speaking to Jesus like that! But if we pause and reflect for a moment we can see that many in the Christian faith today are still trying to do exactly that. So many people today still try to define Jesus by shaping him into their own mold. There’s the “vengeful Jesus” – a ruler of majesty and power like a warrior king, smiting with lightning bolts and horrible fates any who would dare challenge him, chopping down and throwing into the fire any who would have the least hesitation to bow down deep enough, or quickly enough, or to smile prettily enough.

There are also those who try to define him as “Darth Vader Jesus” - a fiery angry prophet like Elijah wielding the power of God like some kind of divine light saber, whrumm, whrumm, slicing off the heads of any who would even think bad thoughts.

We cannot miss those who today try to define him as “Santa Claus Jesus” – with a “naughty or nice” list and a sack full of remedies and blessings, dispensing treats to those who would leave him the religious equivalents of milk and cookies.

Neither can we miss those who try to define him as “my secret Jesus” – unheard, unseen except in a closeted “Jesus and me” club. Or how about defining him as “hoopla Jesus” who pays attention only to rock music and upraised hands? The list is endless of the ways people try to define Jesus in a way that fits their own desires and needs.

But Jesus was clear about who he understood himself to be, and how God had defined him. He called the crowd together so that all could hear, and explained to them that he was not the kind of Messiah they expected. Quite the opposite of a fire-breathing kingly figure that blasted all into submission through fearful displays of vengeance and wrath, Jesus declared that

if any wanted to follow him they would have to follow his example of self-denial, of putting the needs and wants of others first, of carrying the burdens of others as he would carry the burdens of the world on the cross. Echoing the model of divine sacrifice that he would himself display at the end of that road to Jerusalem, Jesus instructed them that any who would wish to save their lives through self-determination, working in their own strength, would lose their lives; but any who would lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the good news that he brought would save their life. “What can you give in return for your life?”, he asked the crowd, and the answer of course is that there is nothing we can offer that is sufficient, except giving ourselves in response to his magnificent gift of life, a gift proclaimed and sealed in his rising again on the third day, just as he had told them he would.

Perhaps the clue for us lies in a subtle but powerful twist to the phrase I used for the title for this sermon. Instead of hearing the words “defining Jesus” as a verb followed by an object; i.e. Jesus as the one being defined by us or others, we might hear those words “defining Jesus” as an adjective and a subject; i.e. Jesus as the one who rightfully does the defining – of us.

“If anyone would follow me”, Jesus said, after blowing to bits Peter’s view of his role of Messiah, “let them deny themselves, and take up their cross”. Jesus presented himself to them as a Messiah that was so totally not what they expected, a king who would lay down his own life to preserve the lives of his servants. And he goes on to define to those who have ears to listen what kind of people those who would be his followers should be: those who would also offer themselves fully in his service; those who would instead of wresting and grasping for control of themselves and others would let themselves be shaped – be defined – by the grace and mercy of Christ at work in them.

To Peter’s credit, and to the credit of the rest of the disciples, and indeed to the credit of untold millions of faithful Christians, they did in turn take up their crosses, and follow him. And now the mantle is passed to us, and it is our turn to follow Jesus. It’s our happy turn to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, to gain our lives by losing them serving him. This doesn’t mean hanging ourselves on meat hooks as they do in some parts of the world. Neither does this mean dragging ourselves off into gloomy isolation in some wordless monastery. Not even does this mean that we have to spend our lives beating up on ourselves, groveling in abject self-abuse. What it does mean is that we are called to see Jesus not as some divine warrior-God wreaking havoc and chaos, but to let ourselves be defined by his self-giving love, a love fueled by God, and manifest in Jesus’ caring, healing, supporting actions, actions that culminated in his once-and-for-all ultimate sacrifice on our behalf, dying and rising again to set us free, and to give us life abundant. Thanks be to God for his Messiah who was not what you’d expect, a Messiah full of grace, even Jesus Christ our Lord.