

JESUS' IDENTITY AND PETER

MARK 8:27-33

Meeting Jesus in the Gospels

OPENING PRAYER

Come Holy Spirit of God, Open my heart to receive God's word to me today. Help me to grasp the truth of who Jesus is, Rather than bending Jesus to fit my hopes. Amen.

EXEGESIS

Poor Peter. You would think that his response "you are the Messiah" was right. 'Messiah' was a fairly flexible concept at the time but generally meant someone anointed by God to bring about God's rescue of his people. Surely that is a good start? Jesus' initial reaction is ... well ... we may say mixed. He doesn't deny or challenge Peter's conclusion that he is the Messiah, but turns away from it, forbidding them from speaking about it and explaining the far less appealing teaching about 'the Son of Man'.

Son of Man is a complicated phrase, but here we could connect it with Daniel ch. 7, which tells the story of God's people, represented by 'one looking like a son of man', suffering at the hands of God's enemies until they are finally vindicated by God. That is what Jesus describes will happen to him too. Interestingly, the combination of Messiah and Son of Man appears again in Mark 14.61-62.

So what is going on? Jesus seems to be side-stepping the title Messiah with all of its connotations of power and importance, and instead picking up a thread from the Old Testament in which God's faithful people suffer greatly before being vindicated by God. He says this openly, as opposed to the secrecy concerning the 'Messiah'.

This is not what Peter, or ourselves if we are honest, wanted to hear. We want the glorious rescue, not this talk of suffering. Presumably this is why Peter took Jesus to one side – urging him to be more positive, to embrace the role of Messiah, and to put aside this talk of suffering and death. What can that have to do with God's will? Jesus' response is to declare that Peter, his closest disciple, is acting like Satan, the power of evil in the world, the one who lies and deceives God's people.

Peter might have been wrong, but was it really so terrible? At the beginning of the gospel Satan tested, or tempted, Jesus (1.13). Unwittingly Peter has done exactly this. Jesus is fighting hard to resist the temptation to be the expected Messiah – with authority and power. He is hanging onto a different vision of how God's plan unfolds for God's faithful people. The 'Son of Man' is eventually vindicated and receives great glory (Daniel 7.14) – just as one might expect the Messiah to – but before then he suffers greatly.

REFLECTION

Temptation is only really tempting when it is something persuasive, something that seems right, and is very convenient. Personally I am never tempted to think I am a great footballer, because it would be laughable. But that I am a little bit more important than I am, or deserve a bit more respect? That is tempting.

Peter, of course, was right. Jesus was the Messiah, but on its own, this would be deeply misleading. It would imply a 'straight road to glory', while Jesus has in mind a different path – following the pattern of the 'Son of Man' in Daniel, in which suffering comes first. 'Messiah' is at best only the first step in gaining a true picture of Jesus. The same is true in many people's development of faith – they begin with a sense of God's powerful rescue, and then later, often with great anguish, come to understand that sometimes God does not rescue them from suffering but goes through it with them.

It is tempting to note that the previous passage in Mark (8.22-25) is the only 'two-stage' healing in the gospels – a blind man is healed but initially only to a point at which people look like 'walking trees' (8.24). Before he achieves full sight, he sees a distortion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you prefer to be the follower of a glorious Messiah or a suffering Son of Man?
2. If you are honest, what do you think Jesus is wrong about? Where do you itch, like Peter, to put him right?
3. What temptations do you face?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You laid aside your glory to take a path of suffering which would bring great benefit to others. Give me the courage and insight to follow your example. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Duff, J., *Peter's Preaching: The Message of Mark's Gospel*, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015.
- Williams, Rowan, *Meeting God in Mark*, SPCK, 2014.