

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

12<sup>th</sup> September 2021 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**MARK 8:27-38**

**LIVES OF CONFESSION**

Some of you may have seen this before (*google: 'Jesus optical illusion' for the picture*), if you have please keep it to yourself. I want you to concentrate on the four dots in the middle of the picture; try and stare at them without blinking. Okay, now close your eyes and tilt your head back. What do you see? Does anyone see an image of Jesus? Does anyone just see it come up all blurry? Does anyone see nothing at all? We are all looking at the same image, but when it comes to looking at it in a deeper way there are a number of different things we might see, or not see.

This is of course just an illusion. There is no magic to it. And whether you can see the image of Jesus or not is certainly not a test of your faith. But maybe looking at an image like that helps us to remember that, in a very real way, people today also see Jesus differently. For some, He is our Lord and Saviour, the Son of God, our friend, our king, the One who died to save all people, rose again, and now rules in glory. For others He is a real person who lived 2,000 years ago, a good man who did good things, taught some good things about how to treat others, but they believe Christians have changed Him from an ordinary man into a god. This is even the view of some still see themselves as 'Christians', but who deny the virgin birth and the resurrection; at most they see Jesus as just another of the prophets. For other people He just plain out didn't exist, but is a completely made up superhero whom many people mistakenly base their lives upon. We all have the same image put before us; some see it clearly, some see it blurred, and others don't see it at all. Perhaps even we ourselves, without going to some of the extremes I've mentioned here, also sometimes have different views and images of Jesus.

In our Gospel reading for today Jesus asks His disciples two questions. First of all, 'who do people say I am?', and secondly, 'who do you say I am?'. The question, 'who is Jesus?' is one which each

person who has ever lived or ever will live has to answer at some time in their life. It has to be answered because our whole life, both now and for eternity, is determined by our answer to this question. Even those who never think about Jesus answer this question of who Jesus is for them by their lack of a response.

So, who is Jesus?

It can be hard to pin down who Jesus is with just words, as the disciples found out when Jesus asked them that same question. First of all He said to them, 'Who do people say I am?' They answered, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, some one of the prophets'. All quite flattering answers if they were talking about anyone else but Jesus, but we know they are all wrong. Then He asks them the big question, 'Who do you say I am?' Not surprisingly, it's Peter who answers, he's always ready to say what is in his head straight away. This time Peter makes a good confession, he calls Jesus the Messiah, or the Christ, which means the One the Old Testament had promised as the Saviour God was sending for His people. It's also the first time in Mark's Gospel that a human being has said who Jesus is; previously it was just God at Jesus' baptism and some demons. But as right as the answer seems, it's still not complete; now there's more to Jesus' identity. And so Jesus tells the disciples not to speak to others about Him in this way.

This story is also the start of Jesus' journey to the cross, and it's this journey, and His followers' role in it, which is what the story is about. After Peter's confession, Jesus goes on to explain to the disciples what will happen to Him. It's the first time they have heard this side of His mission. They have seen His power, they have heard His teaching, they have been His friend, but now they hear that He will die a very painful and very shameful death. They have left everything to follow Him, but is being a part of this what they signed up for?

And now we see more of the Peter we are used to, the one who puts his foot in his mouth. After hearing these words of Jesus Peter tells him to stop talking like that. This is the same man who had just

said Jesus was the Messiah! Did he really understand what he was saying before? He couldn't have. So now Peter shows two things; firstly, he doesn't really understand who Jesus is. And, secondly, even though he makes the confession about Jesus with his mouth, he is not prepared to follow that up with his life.

We can't be too hard on Peter, though, because we know we see a lot of ourselves in him too. He found it easy to follow Jesus on what seemed to be the glory road, but harder when Jesus started talking about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him. We're no different, are we? Often the way we want to see Jesus is the nice ways; the Loving Shepherd, the Great Protector, the One who earns our forgiveness. That's the good stuff, the easy stuff, about being a Christian. And it's right, and it's there. But like Peter's confession, it's not complete. If we only think like this we see prayer for example as being a way of getting God to do what we want, instead of putting ourselves under His will. We will also see our faith and our Christian life as being an investment; something we give in the hope of good returns. That's the way of glory, but it's not the way of discipleship Jesus calls His followers to here.

Instead, listen to the words Jesus gave to the disciples as He called them to follow Him, "If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul?" *Mark 8:34-37 CEV* To be a follower means to know about all those good, loving, caring, forgiving things about Jesus, but it also means being prepared to live out our confession of Him by following Him with our whole lives. And this isn't always easy. For Jesus this denial led to the cross. For us it involves sometimes having to put aside our own feelings and preferences for the sake of the Gospel. It means we forgive and forget, rather than seek victory in a disagreement, because in giving way graciously the Gospel is better proclaimed. In denying ourselves we seek to serve God and others in all we can, putting their needs first instead of our own. Certainly not always an easy thing to do.

This kind of denial is foreign to both our human natures and to our world. We are bombarded so often with being told how we can get more for ourselves, and now Jesus tells us to give ourselves up for Him and for the good news. But it is this selflessness which is at the core of what it means to be a disciple. And it is in living as a disciple, following Jesus, that we live out the confession we make with our mouths. We do this because Jesus carried His ministry to the cross perfectly, and there He both won our forgiveness, and also helped us to get the strength we now need to follow Him. It's not easy to follow in this way, is it? It involves giving up so much of ourselves. But as those who are being saved we can do it knowing that we live in His love and forgiveness.

There are so many answers we can give to that question, 'who is Jesus?', and so many of those answers are right. But let's also remember that Jesus tells us here to not only make this confession in words, but also to live it out in our lives. Through Jesus, we now have new life. May this new life now come out and show itself as each day, in His name, we seek to take up our cross, follow Him, and seek to make our priority to share and show His love in everything we say and do. Who is Jesus? He is our Saviour, our friend, our Redeemer, and everything else that goes with that. How do we show who He is to us? By each day, with His strength, living lives which serve and point to Him above all else. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

#### **Who is Jesus?**

- Do you have a favourite picture, image, or name of Jesus? Think about or share why this description of Jesus is special for you.
- How does your description of Jesus bring you comfort? How can you use your answer to this question to help others to come to know Him also?

#### **Confessing Jesus With Our Lives**

We are called to confess Jesus as our Saviour with our words, but also with our lives.

- Is there anything about following God in your life which you really struggle with? Perhaps forgiving others, putting your own opinions aside, or making a positive witness to God with your life.
- Acknowledge your struggles, ask for God's forgiveness for them, and pray for strength to help you witness to God's love and peace in all you say and do.

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12.09.2021*