

Trinity 14 – 13th September 2009

Isaiah 50:4-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

20 or so years ago, in the circle of musicians I moved in, there was a vogue for exploring certain techniques which claimed to give individuals better self-projection and confidence. These quite often involved sessions in which the participants were encouraged to do a lot of shouting at each other – supposedly releasing their inner, assertive selves. I think one of these movements actually called itself ‘The Mastery’.

What a long way all that is from the path on which Jesus sets himself in this central moment in Mark’s Gospel – a path which he says his disciples must walk as well.

The starting point of many psychological quests in the 20th c., and now, is the question, ‘Who am I?’ – basically a quest for self-understanding. The same quest ultimately lies behind the growing interest, just now, in tracing back family ancestry through the generations. This is naturally a very absorbing pursuit, and the discovery of what has gone to making us who we are now can be personally enlightening, as well as satisfying our curiosity.

But the New Testament is of a different age, before self-analysis, and preoccupation with the question ‘who am I?’, was prevalent. The question which Jesus invites his disciples to consider is not who they are, but who *he* is: ‘who do people say I am?’ What emerges is that this isn’t some narcissistic, self-regarding fascination on his part - ‘how am I coming over?’, ‘do people like me?’ - far from it. From the way the dialogue unfolds it grows clear that the way people answer this question will determine the kind of people they become.

When the letter of James states, baldly, ‘not many of you should become teachers’, we should obviously not see this as a bar now to pursuing a career in Education! James is referring not to the classroom, but to the church community. The Jewish communities out of which the church grew had a whole structure of individuals who were authorised to teach the law in great detail. As we see frequently, much of Jesus’ ministry is in direct opposition to the stultifying effect that these scribes, teachers and Pharisees were having on ordinary people’s relationship with God.

If people were saying of Jesus that he was a prophet – even the greatest of the prophets of old, Elijah, returning to give further revelations from God, they would perhaps be likely – if they accepted his words – simply to collect all his sayings and add them to this great weight of teachings, maybe becoming experts in their master’s sayings, and passing on this ‘mastery’ to others. To this day, many people still put Jesus in a similar category, thinking of Jesus himself as a great moral ‘teacher’, whom we do well to emulate. But this is an inadequate grasp of the truth Jesus now begins to unwrap to his followers.

When Peter comes out with his ‘confession’ that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah – the Anointed One of God, although Jesus doesn’t exactly give this description a ringing endorsement (perhaps because people had various set notions of what such a Messiah would be like), this seems nevertheless to be a turning point in Mark, enabling Jesus from now on in the Gospel to spell out the *true* meaning of his role, and therefore what it means truly to be his disciple.

The New Testament does recognise the need for good teaching as part of Christian formation, and there is an alarming ignorance – even among church people – of the basic tenets of the Christian Faith, but Jesus starts his unpacking of the nature of faith in him by presenting it, not as a mass of teaching that can be consumed and marketed, but as a whole Way of being – the Way whose pattern is the Cross, and which puts us into a living relationship with that Wisdom which was in the beginning - with God. The first believers were even called, not ‘Christians’, but ‘followers of *the Way*’.

Paradoxically, our faith offers us that very self-knowledge so many desire so deeply – but it’s a self-knowledge that’s achieved in relationship to God as we follow Jesus Christ in ‘the Way’.

Father Paul