

If I were Jesus I'd have stayed where I was. This is the point in Mark's Gospel where Jesus sets out on the journey that would take him to Jerusalem. Here he speaks for the first time about what will happen to him: that he will be rejected, unjustly accused, be put to great agony and eventually be killed. He says all this in a place called Caesarea Philippi, and I've been there. It's gorgeous. Snow melting high on Mount Hermon pours down in torrents to the valleys below, and the land is green and fertile and full of trees for shade. You'd go there on holiday. It's no place to say such horrendous things. If I were Jesus I'd have kept my mouth shut and stayed where I was. That's certainly what Peter thinks.

For much of Mark's Gospel up to this point Jesus has been teaching his followers, talking to them and showing them what it is to bring God's kingdom close to people. Here, in beautiful Caesarea, he then asks them a direct question about what they now know. When asked what others think about Jesus, their answers reveal their world-view. They fit Jesus into an existing framework of thought and belief which may well have been deep in their unconscious. John the Baptist, Elijah, the Prophets. Pigeon holes which already existed. So Jesus makes it more specific. What do you think?

It's Peter who makes the breakthrough statement. You are the Christ. It's an answer which can only have been given by God, you feel. It challenges the existing world view of the people and opens up new levels of believing. 'You are the Christ - the Messiah'. To an extent the answer is God-given, but what follows reveals that Peter has much more to do to understand what he has just said. What Peter believed the Messiah to be and what Jesus would actually do were poles apart. For Peter to understand it would take a journey from lush and beautiful Caesarea, from the comfort of a safe belief in and secure relationship with his master into experiences and understandings he could never have dreamed of. It would have been easier to stay where they were.

Jesus doesn't ask many direct questions of his followers in the Gospels. But when he does they are the most searching imaginable. As a preacher I don't push people to answer direct questions very much either. But I will today. Who do you think Jesus is? Really. This is at the centre of our believing. Your image of God, your understanding of who Jesus is, and how God is involved in every aspect of our life will determine how you act as well as what you believe - it will affect your unconscious lifestyle as well as your conscious decision making. It will take you on a journey from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

On a course once we were given a pound of modelling clay, and asked to fiddle about with it without deciding what it would eventually look like. We were told, after we'd started, that what we ended up with would be our image of God. It taught me that it is the unconscious image of God which affects my believing, just as much as all the theology I had done. When Jesus asked his disciples a question - who do people say I am? - he was challenging even those who have made the connection between him and the Messiah foretold for hundreds of years. Their unconscious image of the Messiah was not what Jesus would be.

I wonder then if you've been delving into your unconscious, your automatic way of thinking about Christ, and have begun to articulate who you say that he is. Are you

inspired by his rudeness to religious authorities, and his delight in being with prostitutes and the poor? Are you thrilled by his call to love your enemy and reach out hands of peace to your persecutors? Did your heart leap at the prospect of dying for him, and carrying his sufferings about as a mark of witness? Are you champing at the bit at the thought of taking up a cross?

I'm not. I'm all for staying in Caesarea. I'd rather Jesus called me to fine lunches, sun filled walks to church in genteel surroundings, stimulating debate and glorious music in ancient buildings. I don't think Jesus rules these out, or I wouldn't be here. But here, at the turning point of Mark's Gospel, Jesus calls us to follow him, and show the world that there is healing in brokenness, that life will truly be lived when it is given away, and true riches gained when all is given up. When Jesus talked about the cross, it would have been all too familiar to his hearers. Read the history of Jerusalem and you'll discover that crucifixions of thousands of people at a time seem to happen all the time. If you were given a cross you were already dead. Jesus asks if we are prepared to see our lives as having ended, so that what we do is all about him, and offered in service to others.

How we respond to situations we face will depend on what we believe about Christ. And how we react instinctively to things will depend on that also. Even though Peter got it about Jesus - Matthew's Gospel even has him saying that Jesus is the 'Son of the living God' - he had more learning to do to understand that his version of the Messiah was not what Jesus would be. Conquering the Romans and restoring the glory of the Jews in their land was not what Jesus was about. Conquering death itself, opening up the love of God to the whole world was a much bigger thing, but would be achieved in ways which would challenge every aspect of Jesus's followers' thinking and being. And it should do that for us too.

It would be easier to stay in Caesarea. But we are heading for Jerusalem. We carry a cross, because we have already died. To accept the death of Christ for us and in us is to know the power of his resurrection, and then to be offered completely and utterly for him. I hope this is a challenge for you to work out what Jesus calls you to, and how his sacrificial love will be worked out in your conscious and unconscious life. Be challenged by Jesus. Break down the walls of your understanding, and see how you then change. Be offered to God, and you will discover your life, even as you give it away.