

September 16, 2012 Mark 8:27-38 - "Why Must We Carry a Cross?"
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Frequently when we meet someone for the first time, we introduce ourselves and share some of our personal history, trying to find out what experiences, places or people we have in common. When I first met Vivien, our new student minister, following my service at Northwood, I was quick to learn that we shared a common place – Drummondville in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, a common person in Canon Hal Church who prepared her for confirmation and who was retired and assisting at St. Barnabas Church in North Hatley where I was serving my student placement and from where I was eventually ordained. After breaking the ice with these shared experiences, it was easy to sit and talk like we have known each other a long time.

My wife Kathy and I have both shared at times when we were in Montreal that if you were actively involved in music or the Anglican Church, that Montreal became a much smaller place as we would constantly meet new people similar to ourselves.

Bishop Cutler echoed this last Sunday when he shared how we tend to form bonds with people like ourselves, but find it hard to be as open with people that are totally different. I was blessed to spend a year in the Middle East as a college student in Lebanon where many different cultures, languages and religions mixed, an experience quite unlike my upbringing in the white suburbs of Washington, DC.

By the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus disciples has been called, they have toured Galilee, crossed the Sea of Galilee in a storm, seen Jesus rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, received news of the death of John the Baptist, fed over five thousand men and women, seen Jesus walk on the water, and observed dozens of miracles of healing. In these months or shared experiences together, you would have thought that the disciples would have discovered who Jesus really was.

So Jesus asks them, "who do you say that I am?"

If I asked you to takeout a sheet of paper, and respond to this question, " Who do you think Jesus is?" What would you write down? If you were a good artist, what would your drawing of Jesus looks like? Perhaps you would answer or draw an image from Sunday School, or from your confirmation class. Perhaps your image of Jesus is a compilation of all the sermons you have listened to both here and elsewhere, and for some of you that would be over 60-70 years of sermons. Perhaps you have taken a university course on Christianity, or are really dedicated to daily Bible reading.

If I were to collect all your answers and drawings, I would find dozens of different images and answers. Which one is correct? Are any of them correct? Is there a definitive answer to this question?

Is Jesus he Messiah? If that's what you think, what does that mean? To the Jewish world of Jesus' time, the Messiah was supposed to be a person of power, to take charge, to set things right and free the Jewish people from the oppression of the Romans. A group of Jews called Zealots believed the Messiah would lead a vast violent uprising to rid Israel of the Romans once and for all. But then comes this man Jesus. He refused to take up arms. He debated with the Jewish and Roman authorities and tried to explain that THE MESSIAH would only save the people by sacrificing

himself. In the second part of our Gospel this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that there is a cost of following him, a cost of pain and suffering and even death. Were they willing to travel that road with him. Am I willing? Are you willing also?

Who do you say he is? Messiah, Savior, Lord, shaman, teacher, friend, prophet, prince of peace?

From the very beginning, who Jesus was, what he was about, was far from self-evident. There were people who stood face-to-face with Jesus and said, "This is God incarnate." There appear to be many more who said, "This man is crazy." Jesus realized that if people were going to follow him, and if his followers were going to be truly effective Christians in the world, they needed to know exactly who he was. They also needed to know precisely what was involved in being a Christian. Although I think that for most of us, the biggest issue isn't that we've listened to Jesus and fail to understand who he is and what he calls us to do, it is that we have listened to him and found the way can be very difficult, if not impossible.

At our Wednesday Eucharist I shared some history of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, North Africa whose martyrdom is celebrated on the 13th of Sept. Born into a monied upper class, he trained and serving as a lawyer for the pagan government of his time in the 3rd C. He became a Christian at age 50 and retired from his governmental duties. However, as a recent convert, he soon gained leadership within the Christian community which had been enduring painful persecution under the pagan authorities. He was elected their Bishop in 248 AD and tried to protect his people from further persecution, though for 2 years he had to go into hiding to keep from being arrested. Persecutions ended for a number of years, but when they began anew in 258, Bishop Cyprian voluntarily turned himself over to the authorities. At every opportunity he witnessed to his faith, but after a brief trial he was taken outside the city and beheaded.

Cyprian knew exactly who Jesus was, and he knew and experienced the cost of what being a follower of Jesus, in his place and his time, would be. He has joined that company of apostles, prophets and martyrs who shared a common belief and actions together. We commemorate them all on All Saints Day.

To answer the question Jesus posed about his identity is to discover that we are somehow joined to everyone else in his body. Where do we experience Jesus' suffering? In our own lives when we have lost a loved one, or moved away from our roots, or lost a job, or become diseased, or handicapped. Within our communities there are drug addicted parents and children, adults who cannot read, teenagers who become pregnant, and victims of street shootings.

Jesus' suffering is all around us. It is another hard road that lead to Calvary, but ultimately continues to Easter.

Let us remember and pray for those experiencing oppression because of their faith, that they may respond to their persecution without violence. Let us show the genuineness of our faith by treating all people with fairness and the poor with active compassion.

If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.