

Message for August 23, 2020

Mark 8:27-38

This past June Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, unwittingly set off a bit of a firestorm. The archbishop, who is the spiritual leader of Anglican churches throughout the world, said that there would be a thorough review of all the statues in Canterbury Cathedral including those of Jesus. The review was in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and removal of statues such as those of Confederate leaders, slave dealers and others around the world. The response to the proposed review however was swift and ferocious. The critics charged that the archbishop was just being 'politically correct' and that he wanted to remove the statues of Jesus simply because they portray him as a white male.

In his defense Welby pointed out that at no time had he ever said that any of the statues would be removed. What he did say however is that always portraying Jesus as a white male may well have a limiting impact on how we understand him. Historically of course, Jesus of Nazareth was not a European-looking white man. Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew but we in the West have usually portrayed him in our own image. Then, all too often perhaps, we unthinkingly thought that this was the only way to depict him. To say this however, that 'white' depictions of Jesus are the only right ones is not only historically inaccurate, it is also the height of arrogance. In fact every culture depicts Jesus in its own image; that is why, depending on where a person is, one may see statues and paintings that depict Jesus as Black, Chinese, Latino and so on. These statues and paintings may well seem jarring to us as we don't usually think of Jesus as being anything but Caucasian but these other cultures are only doing what we ourselves tend to do. The critics however were unmollified and the debate still continues. While there is a debate though over how Jesus should be depicted, that pales in comparison to the debate over what Jesus was actually like.

Some time ago I read a book that sought to answer the age-old question of just who and what Jesus is. Every chapter consisted of one person's answer and it all made for some very interesting and thought-

provoking reading. One writer for example said that Jesus was a typical first century A.D. Jewish rabbi. According to another writer Jesus was a philosopher while yet another argued that Jesus was a faith healer and on it went. At the end of virtually every chapter I said to myself, "yes, this is the real Jesus!" but then I read the next and thought the same thing! Indeed by the end of the book I felt more confused than when I first began and I found myself wondering; is Jesus whoever or whatever we want him to be? As with our paintings and statues of Jesus, do we just create or understand him in ways that suit our own needs and beliefs? This may well seem to be rather abstract but it isn't, it isn't simply because our understanding or interpretation of Jesus influences and even shapes our lives as his disciples.

Today's scripture passage relates one of the most important episodes in Jesus' ministry. One day Jesus asked his disciples "Who do the people say that I am?" Well, this was an easy enough question to answer; 'some people say that you are John the Baptist, others say that you are Elijah and still others say that you are one of the prophet.' Jesus then put the disciples on the spot and asked them directly, "But who do you say I am?"

I imagine that there was an awkward embarrassed silence; who did they think Jesus was anyways? Finally Peter spoke up; "You are", dare he say it, "the Messiah". In response Peter was told that he was absolutely right. Jesus is the Messiah or, as other translations phrase it, the Anointed One or the Christ. Jesus is the one who came to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth in all of its power and glory! Jesus is the one who came to this earth to make everything right! This is certainly what the disciples expected Jesus to do too, to take the power and reign. That is why the disciples argued so bitterly amongst themselves over who was most important next to Jesus himself. That is why Peter also got so upset when Jesus went on to talk about going on to Jerusalem to die. Why the Messiah couldn't die on a cross like any common criminal! Why everyone knew that the Messiah was supposed to drive out the Romans and establish the Kingdom here on earth in all of its power and glory! That is what they expected Jesus to do and that of course is what some people today still expect Jesus to do.

Jesus of course did talk about his coming back and establishing the Kingdom once and for all but he never said when that is going to happen. That however hasn't stopped people from speculating about when it will happen; indeed in every age there have been people who are so convinced that things are so bad that the Second Coming must surely take place sooner rather than later. That certainly includes some people today. Confronted by the sometimes seemingly overwhelming challenges of today, the pandemic, climate change and social unrest, there is no shortage of self-styled prophets who are loudly proclaiming that 'The End' is near and that the Kingdom of God is going to be established once and for all sooner rather than later. The truth of course is that no one knows when this will happen; we've been waiting now for almost two thousand years. What we must also remember though is that when Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God becoming a reality, he did not just speak about it as a singular future event; he also spoke about it as being an ongoing process. As related in Luke's gospel:

"Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The coming of the Kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, here it is or there it is, because the Kingdom of God is in your midst.'"

We can also think of Jesus' words found elsewhere in Luke's gospel:

"What shall I compare the Kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The Kingdom of God is not just what will be accomplished at some point in the future; the Kingdom is also a process that involves each of us here and now. Each one of us, whether we realize it or not, is helping to build the Kingdom; we do so word by word, deed by deed, day by day. In fact it is this that gives our lives value, purpose and meaning.

During the Great Fire of 1666 in London England, the medieval Cathedral of St. Paul's was totally destroyed. The great architect, Sir Christopher Wren was given the task of designing the new church and

overseeing its construction. While the building was going on, a journalist interviewed three of the workers and asked them what they were doing. The first worker replied that he was cutting stone for ten shillings a day. The second replied that he was working ten hour days. The third worker however replied, "I'm helping Sir Christopher Wren construct London's greatest cathedral." And so he was; St. Paul's is one of the greatest, most magnificent churches in the entire world. It was the third worker who saw the 'big picture' and appreciated what he was really doing.

Too often perhaps, we may be tempted to think that our lives don't really matter yet they do because we are all participating in the greatest building project of all time. We are doing nothing less than helping Jesus build the Kingdom of God here on earth here and now. Indeed the importance of our day-to-day lives is brought home by this exchange.

One of the greatest missionaries of the twentieth century was an American named Eli Stanley Jones. He spent most of his time in India and, not surprisingly, he came to know Mahatma Gandhi. Stanley asked him why he rejected Christianity to which Gandhi replied: "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Every day, perhaps unwittingly, we answer the question posed by Jesus himself: "But who do you say that I am?" Every day we prove or disprove the answer that Jesus is the Messiah; the one who, amongst other things, came to make the Kingdom of God here on earth a reality. Every day we help build up or tear down his kingdom. And we would dare wonder whether we and our lives really matter, especially during these challenging times?