

## **Message for February 14, 2021**

### **Mark 9:2-9**

The Apocalyptic Jesus. The Jesus Seminar. Crossan's Jesus. The Gnostic Jesus. The Pauline Jesus. The Catholic Jesus. The Nihilistic Jesus. The Buddhist Jesus. These are some of the chapter titles of a book that I have been re-reading lately. It is entitled "The Contemporary Jesus" and, as the chapter titles suggest, this book is all about what some scholars think about Jesus and his identity. I must admit though that as I read it, I am not sure what to think; there are so many different interpretations of Jesus and most seem to have some truth to them. Indeed reading this book it is easy to conclude that Jesus can be anyone or anything we want him to be.

Who and what is Jesus of Nazareth? There is certainly nothing new in this question and in fact it goes all the way back to the time of Jesus himself. Remember the time for example when Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do the people say that I am?" The disciples had no shortage of answers. Well they said, some people think that you are a prophet. Other people think that you are John the Baptist raised from the dead while yet other people think that you are the great prophet Elijah returned and so a sign that the messiah will be coming soon. Even during his own lifetime there was no shortage of ideas about Jesus' identity and that is one of the reasons why the event described in today's scripture passage took place. It did so to settle the question of Jesus' true identity once and for all.

One day not long before Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem he took his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John to the top of a high mountain. While they were there something strange and wonderful took place. Right before the disciples' eyes Jesus was transfigured; his clothes became dazzling white and his face began to shine. Then two other figures appeared beside Jesus and without ever being told, the disciples knew who they were. The first was Elijah who was the greatest of all the prophets. The second figure was the great lawgiver, Moses himself! It is no wonder perhaps that the disciples were absolutely terrified. Peter began to babble but while he was still talking the

mountaintop was enveloped by a cloud. Out of that cloud came the voice of God himself; "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!"

Now there was no excuse for any doubt or confusion about Jesus' true identity; Moses and Elijah were great but Jesus is even greater still since he is God's very own son! If we take today's passage at face value then the debate over Jesus' true identity was settled once and for all. Jesus of Nazareth is most certainly a prophet, a lawgiver and a wonderful teacher but more than anything else, he is God's beloved son and we know this because God himself has said so! "But so what?" some may ask. It is nice to know that Jesus is God's beloved son but what, if anything, does that mean for us and our lives here and now? That brings us to the second part of what God said in today's passage.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the confirmation of Jesus' identity that we forget about what else God said that day on the mountaintop; "Listen to him". As important as it most certainly is to know who and what Jesus of Nazareth is, that is not enough. We must also listen to him and that means taking his teaching seriously and trying to be like him. And what was Jesus like?

One thing we know is that Jesus had an incredible sense of caring for the helpless, the weak and the less important members of society. As I noted in a message a few weeks ago, children in Jesus' day were of little importance and that explains why the disciples tried to stop some mothers from bringing their children to see him. The disciples thought that Jesus had more important things to think about and people to see than to spend his time with a bunch of children. That however was not the way Jesus saw it. He insisted that contrary to what the disciples thought, the children were important and that if the disciples wanted to enter the kingdom of God, then they had to be more like the children. Indeed the barriers that divided people in Jesus' day meant little to him.

Back in those days for example the Jews absolutely hated the Samaritans and vice versa but Jesus didn't hate the Samaritans; in fact he even made a Samaritan the hero of one of his most famous stories of all, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story it was the hated, despised Samaritan of all people who was the hero, and just as the barrier of race meant nothing to Jesus, neither did the barrier that divided the sexes. We can think of the episode of the woman at the well for example.

One day Jesus met a woman at a well and asked her for a drink of water. Now back then a man never ever engaged a woman in a conversation in public unless she was his wife or otherwise related to him. This person though wasn't just a woman, she was also a Samaritan and a notorious sinner to boot! It is no wonder then that the disciples were shocked when they returned and found Jesus talking to her! Jesus did so however because when he looked at her, he didn't just see a woman, a Samaritan or a notorious sinner. When he looked at her, he also saw a hurting person who was shunned by all. In fact it was his incredible sense of care and compassion that brought him into repeated conflict with the Pharisees.

The Pharisees thought that obeying the religious laws was all important and that included the stipulation about not working on the Sabbath. The religious law of the day dictated that if a person was ill, one could only do what had to be done to keep that person alive; anything beyond that was work and therefore forbidden. This explains why the Pharisees were so infuriated that Jesus healed people on the Sabbath when their lives weren't in any danger. The Pharisees reasoned that the healing could have waited another day but that's not the way Jesus saw it. Why make a person suffer even one more day if they could be healed immediately, even if that day was the Sabbath?

While Jesus had an incredible sense of care and compassion and while he put people and their needs ahead of the social conventions and even the religious laws of the day, he also had a strong sense of right and wrong. He certainly did not believe in what we call moral relativism; a world or society in which anything and everything goes. We can think of Jesus' response to the woman caught in the act of adultery.

Her accusers brought her before Jesus and demanded to know what he thought. The Law said that she should die but if Jesus agreed with this, then what about his famed sense of compassion? If however Jesus told them to let her go, then wasn't he in effect saying that there is no difference between right and wrong and that everyone can do as they wish? In his response Jesus did not say that the Law was wrong but he challenged her accusers: "Let he who is among you without sin cast the first stone." What Jesus did was affirm that there is a difference between right and wrong but he also showed love and

compassion; “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” If we wish, we can also remember the time in the Temple when Jesus drove out the money changers because they were fleecing people in the name of God. In the face of such blatant wrong, Jesus was filled with a holy righteous anger, not because he was being wronged, but because others were. Truly as one person has said, Jesus was the man who lived for others and as he did, so too should we.

Who and what is Jesus of Nazareth? In a sense this seems to be an abstract question with little relevance for our daily lives but our answer is crucial. He is the Son of God and God has told us to listen to him which means trying to be like him. It is not always easy to follow Jesus’ example but when we fail, as we all sometimes do, we can, secure in the knowledge of God’s love and forgiveness, pick ourselves up and try again. And that of course is what next week, the first Sunday in Lent and the ones that follow leading up to Easter are all about; the amazing redeeming love of God for not only us but all his children.