

27 August 2023

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

In early July there was a bit of a storm over reports that Wellington mayor, Tory Whanau, had been intoxicated and had left a restaurant without paying.¹ It was reported that at one point she asked the waiter “Do you know who I am?” “Do you know who I am?” Newspaper columnist Virginia Fallon went on to describe this as “the awful, unforgivable phrase New Zealanders won’t stomach” because it displays arrogance.²

In Romans 12, Paul advises his readers, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement.”³ Members of the infant church could easily fall into getting a bit too puffed up and self-important around their spiritual gifts – a topic Paul also addresses strongly in 1 Corinthians 12. But this was not only a problem for the infant church: it remains a challenge today.

To think of oneself with sober judgement is just as much about not thinking *too little* of oneself as it is about not thinking too highly: while Paul doesn’t say so directly, it is clear from his writings that too low an assessment of oneself was equally problematic.

And the problem is that all this wrongful self-evaluation has a toxic and destructive effect on relationships within the church. We start saying and doing things to put the uppity in their place or to push ourselves forward; we stop asking for help because we’re afraid of being made to feel we’re not good enough; we stop volunteering because someone will get offended that we’re putting ourselves forward; we start looking for defects in others so that we can feel better about ourselves; we get grumpy about others’ successes; we hide our failures. On and on it goes. And the result is not just hurt feelings; we become less and less effective as the church

¹ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/493079/wellington-mayor-tory-whanau-left-restaurant-without-paying-it-was-an-honest-mistake>

² <https://www.waikatotimes.co.nz/a/nz-news/350032751/do-you-know-who-i-am-the-phrase-where-kiwis-draw-the-line>

³ Romans 12:3b

because we are no longer functioning as the mutually inter-dependent team with complementary gifts we are meant to be.

When Paul addresses this issue in his letters to the churches in Corinth, the gifts listed are ones that we would naturally think of as spiritual or supernatural or even spectacular; gifts around which a kind of spiritual superiority might easily develop – gifts like prophecy, tongues, healing.⁴ What is interesting about the list Paul presents in Romans is that it includes things that might be regarded as quite ordinary, practical, and mundane – gifts of service, teaching, encouragement, giving, and leadership. To me this is the first corrective to thinking of oneself more highly or lowly than one ought: these diverse gifts, from the spectacular to the ordinary, are listed alongside each other and given equal importance. The prophet is given the same honour as the person who provides groceries for the food bank; the person who puts on morning tea is given the same honour as the one who preaches. We all belong to one another: “we are dependent on one another, and the one-anotherness of the Christian fellowship is enhanced by the diversity of our gifts.”⁵

Paul says, “think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” There is some debate about the translation and interpretation here,⁶ but an explanation I find coherent is that Paul is asserting that the only measure we can use for ourselves is the fact of saving faith in Jesus the Messiah, the fact that Jesus died for us. The point is that this faith is common to all who have accepted it: our self-assessment relative to others is founded on the fact that we are all in the same boat, that for all us it is true that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”⁷

The way we regard others is determined by how we regard ourselves. How we regard ourselves is determined first by how we see ourselves in relation to God.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30

⁵ Stott, *Romans*, p.326

⁶ Brief discussions are found in Stott, *Romans*, pp.325-326, Byne, *Romans*, pp.371-372, and Zeisler, *Romans*, pp.295-296

⁷ Romans 5:8

And it seems to me that that must first be informed by how we see God; and how we see God is determined by whether and how we see God in Jesus. Jesus' question of his disciples remains as pertinent as ever: "Who do you say I am?"

In Matthew's gospel we read of how the signs and words of Jesus have provoked sustained opposition from some and speculation from others – Who is this man? In a private moment away from all of this, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

I don't think Jesus is actually interested in their answer: he must be aware of the speculation that is buzzing around him. I think that this is just his lead-in, a gentle build up to the really important question.

They answer, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Perhaps Jesus is John the Baptist, who too had preached the coming of the kingdom of God. Perhaps Jesus is Elijah – some Jews expected the great prophet to return from the dead to inaugurate a restored Israel. Perhaps Jesus is Jeremiah or one of the other prophets of the exile.

The people are trying to fit Jesus into the categories of thought they already hold; rather than letting Jesus redefine their categories by his identity. In any case, these responses tell us a lot about the way Jesus was perceived. Not the cosy, comforting friend of little children; rather, like one of the wild prophets of recent or of ancient times, who had stood up and spoken God's word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious kings. Jesus was acting as God's mouthpiece against injustice and wickedness in high places.⁸

Then comes the vital question. Jesus asked them, "But what about you. Who do you say I am?"

And Simon Peter, under divine revelation, declares the truth – "You are the Messiah [the Christ], the Son of the living God."

⁸ Wright, *Matthew*, p.6

Jesus was not just God's mouthpiece. He was not just speaking God's word against the wicked rulers the time. He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, God's king, who would make all other rulers redundant.

It becomes clear later on that even Peter still needs to have his thought categories adjusted. He still sees the Messiah as one who will use force to overthrow the military oppressors and return Israel to self-rule under God's headship. It will take the cross and resurrection to correct his understanding.

But to this day the question remains the vital one: "Who do you say I am?"

This is not simply a matter of correct identification. For a Jew to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is to make an identification that creates a certain kind of relationship and which demands a certain kind of response.

Ever since Peter made his declaration, men and women of faith have had to come to terms with who Jesus is and what he means for them. In effect Christians down the ages have had to come to an answer to "Who do you say I am?" And we come to this question with the full revelation of Scripture, the full revelation of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. But it is not simply a matter of correct ideas: this is a relationship.

To put ourselves into relationship with Jesus is to recognise how far short we fall of God's standards.

But in this relationship with Jesus, something extraordinary has occurred. Jesus is not standing off, superior, aloof and uncaring. Jesus puts himself in our position, so that we may be the beneficiaries of God's love.

Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" sounds rather similar to the politician's unforgivable "Do you know who I am?" But it is motivated differently: Jesus was not

seeking anything for himself. And we do well to remember that when Jesus asks the question it is asked by one who has every right to arrogance but chooses the way of utmost humility instead.

The fundamental question is how we regard God and Jesus. The next most important question is the one implied in what happens next: it is the question of who does God say *Peter* is. Peter doesn't ask the question, but Jesus declares for him a new identity and role: "You are Peter, and this rock I will build my church..."

We may tend to think of this coming as something of a reward for Peter: "Congratulations, Peter, you got the right answer in the quiz about my identity, and the prize is leadership of the church". But it strikes me that it is as Peter is given revelation of who Jesus is, Peter finds his own true identity and purpose revealed. Peter now sees Jesus as the Son of the living God. To see Jesus in this way, as he truly is, immediately throws light on both, on the one hand, Peter's distance from God and godly life, his human sinfulness and fallibility, and, on the other hand, on the fact that it is only by God's grace and power that his leadership can be called forth, authorised, and equipped. For Peter to rightly see Jesus as the Messiah (the anointed King) is to find himself immediately called into the King's service.

The fundamental question is how we regard God and Jesus. The next most important question is that of our identity before God. It is as we know Christ for who he is that we become fully known to ourselves.

And who are we?

We are chosen and adopted children of the living God. We are brothers and sisters of Christ.

We need to hear this loud and clear, against all the internal and external voices that would seek to define and value us differently.

We are chosen and adopted children of the living God. We are brothers and sisters of Christ.

God loves you and has chosen you. You cannot then say you are not enough; nor can you say that you are more special than anyone else.

And in this we come, as it were, full circle because it is here that we find the basis for sober judgement of ourselves – before God, and before one another. We cannot be arrogant and we cannot be lowly because Jesus is both King and brother, and because our fellow Christians are in exactly the same relation and position.

Jesus, in response to Peter's declaration, announces that it is on Peter, the Rock, that he is going to build his Church. The word Jesus uses is *ecclesia*, which means assembly. When Jesus speaks in this way, we are meant to imagine in the background the rocky heights of Mount Zion, on which the great city Jerusalem was build.

In some Jewish traditions, the Temple in Jerusalem was the place where heaven and earth met. Jesus is now declaring that he is reconstructing this centrepiece of God's world. Heaven and earth will now come together in the Church, the *ecclesia*, the assembling or gathering of the people of Christ. Jesus is building a community, consisting of all those who give allegiance to him as God's anointed king.⁹

Jesus brings God's heavenly truth into the world. He gives God's answers to man's deepest questions. He shines God's light on the darkness of our existence. And most important of all, he reaches out to each of us with God's abundant and everlasting love. In response to this truth, we are called upon to make our profession of faith, to declare our own allegiance to King Jesus, to speak out in our time who Jesus is¹⁰ and who, in him, we are. And we are called to do this with the diverse others, brothers and sisters in Christ, who are known as we are known.

⁹ Wright, *Matthew*, p.8

¹⁰ Largely a quote from "Who do you say I am" article.

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