

## **“The Promise and the Presence”**

*Mark 8:27, 28, 29*

*“Who do men say I am?” “Who do you say I am?”*

There comes a moment in each of our lives when we can no longer evade some crucial question that has haunted us for a long time. It is often a moment of crisis, a moment we would rather put off into the future. The time comes when it is no longer to put off the time to decide.

I still remember an agonizing letter I received in 1969 from a former student of mine while I was at the University of Exeter on sabbatical. We were far away from much of the turmoil that was going on in the USA and in our universities and colleges at that time. The letter expressed a young man’s agony of having to face a call up when he felt that much that he had come to understand about life brought his conscience to the point of making it impossible to face using any instrument of death. His choice was clear and stark, and he had no choice but to face making the decision. Should he act against his conscience or accept a long prison term, for his request to serve in a non-combatant capacity had been turned down. His moment of agony led him unequivocally to accept the prison term, with all that meant for his future and his career. He was less afraid of that than he was of the destruction of his own conscience. What he told me very simply echoed Martin Luther’s words: “I could do no other!” This young man had been brought to a moment of agonizing decisions. And he chose. Whatever we might want to think of him – he made a conscious choice.

In the Gospel account I read the disciples had been brought to such a point of decision with these two questions that Jesus asked them on the way to Caesarea Philippi. They were to have more crucial moments to face, but these questions forced them to an important moment of choice.

But Jesus brought them to this point of decision rather gently by asking the first question – who did other people think that he was? What was in the minds of those listeners about him? This was an easy question to answer. People thought that he was some kind of prophet. This was very much in a tradition they could understand. Some thought that he was like Elijah.

To be called a prophet like Elijah meant that there were certain views about the kinds of things Jesus would be expected to do and to say. The prophets made judgments about the people of Israel based upon God’s Law. Elijah, you will remember, told the defiant King Ahab that terrible drought would come upon the land because of his apostasy. Failure to recognize God as the God of the entire World was to reject the promise that God had given his people. That could only result in catastrophe for the people. Elijah’s work as a prophet lay in pronouncing judgment upon the acts of Israel because of the rejection of God’s law. The people of Israel had rejected the responsibility of being God’s people and this must mean a rejection of their promise of obedience and their breaking of the covenant made with God.

The task of the prophet was to speak truth to God's people about their relationship with God. They were a kind of thermometer which told Israel whether it was hot or cold in that relationship. While the prophets were not always popular, because they did not always give comforting words to the people, they were always revered and trusted. They might be reviled, but that was because the people understood that they told the truth – and the truth hurts.

But that thermometer was always there for Israel, even if it read cold. So when the people thought of Jesus as a prophet they saw him as an important figure – one who was ready to pass judgment, telling them perhaps that they had wandered off the path of true obedience. But if Jesus was only a prophet he would be a passing phenomenon, certainly one to be remembered with awe and respect, like Elijah or Isaiah, even quoted because of his perceptive judgments, but that would mean that Jesus was nothing more than an important historical figure. Reverence there would be, but no grounds for worship.

But there were some people who seemed to be more perceptive than others. They saw in Jesus another John the Baptist. The interesting thing about John was that he said he was come to proclaim that God's promise of a Savior was about to be fulfilled. John's prophecy was one of **promise**. John not only gave the judgment, but like Isaiah he also proclaimed a promise of **hope**.

The promise of hope gives purpose to our lives, giving meaning and significance to what we do. Such a preacher of hope is to be welcomed. It is worthy of note that a recent election might have been won because of a promise of hope. We look to the future, so that what we do today is done with the expectation that what we do has meaning. John said that his message was one of promise because God's word was about to be fulfilled and that obedience to God's law had purpose and meaning because the hope of God's promise was at hand. Hope is important for us as we live our daily lives.

I remember some time ago flying down to New Orleans from Albany on the way to some conference or other. After scrambling to change my plane in Pittsburg I sat down in my assigned seat, stowed my luggage, pulled out my mystery book and settled down to try to read. After a moment or two I became conscious of the young woman sitting next to me. She was obviously very agitated and nervous and wanted to talk to somebody. So I asked whether she had rushed to make the connection. She then poured out her story to me. She was on her way to an Air Force base near New Orleans where she was to meet her boy-friend. In fact her friend had sent her the ticket to come and spend a week with him. She had heard from his close friend that he intended, as she put it, to pop the question. So she was very excited. I wondered, then, why the extreme nervousness. Well, she told me, she was very afraid of flying, and simply getting on the plane was almost more that she could bear. On take-off I noticed that she gripped the arm rests so tightly that her knuckles were white. After we were airborne she confided in me that she was willing to go through this agony because of the promise that was wrapped in the hope that lay before her at the conclusion of the journey. The hope made an almost impossible journey bearable, and she accepted the suffering she was going through because there was someone at the other end of the flight who would demonstrate his love in a declaration of lasting commitment.

**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, HAMILTON  
SEPTEMBER 13, 2009**

Life must have promise and it must have hope. So wasn't it enough for Jesus to be called one like John the Baptist as one who proclaimed the Promise of God's love and commitment to us? That promise had made it possible for the Hebrews to live through many dark days and years of suffering. To be called "like John the Baptist" was surely accolade enough.

But Jesus did not accept this either. Prophetic judgments and promises relate to future actions, telling of events to come not of God's action now in the present actions of Jesus himself. It is at this point that the disciples grasp the difference between promise and fulfillment, between hope and present consummation. He was not Elijah, nor was he like John the Baptist, he was "the Christ", the Messiah, who is God's chosen one. When Jesus poses the question "But who do you say that I am?" he is not asking a trivial question. He is forcing Peter and the other disciples to make a choice and a significant choice at that. To have answered with calling him another prophet or even another revered John the Baptist they would have rejected Jesus' mission. In calling him "the Christ" they saw that the prophecy and the promise had culminated in Jesus as one who possessed both the promise and the prophecy in his presence. He was in his very presence the hope that God had promised to his people. This is what made Jesus very different from Elijah or John. They looked forward to a coming time; Jesus, however, was God's hope made real and was theirs to possess.

The simple fact is that Jesus is the promise, and it is this that makes a difference between what the people thought about Jesus and the new truth that was dawning upon the disciples. A new light was dawning not only in their minds but in their lives as well, not only in their minds and life, but in the world itself. For the promise made by Jesus was that his coming would bring a new living community, the Kingdom of God. If we think about that carefully what we will understand is that there is a new ruler and a new set of laws and a new sphere of life that comes with Jesus as he is proclaimed "Lord".

The new Kingdom brought into being with Jesus is the presence of a new life and new responsibilities. It is a new life because it holds out not just the hope, but the presence of the possibility of participation in the life of God's wisdom because of who Jesus is. In his presence he is the form and the image through which we can engage with the Eternal presence of God. The prophets could only hold a future of hope, John the Baptist could only present an expectation, however imminent, but Jesus gives us a presence, the presence of God himself in a new form and way of life that can engage us.

In Jesus we are given the deepest insight that is possible for us to receive, insight into the nature of a world ruled by God, with a wisdom which is determined by that rule, and with a bliss which comes from living in that new world.

What does it mean to live in this new Kingdom, this new Promised Land that we have inherited with the coming of Jesus? Certainly it was not quite what Peter expected. The disciples had the right idea about Jesus, he was the Messiah, which means that he brought with him a new reign, a new vision of the presence of God. But Peter certainly had the wrong impression about what that would mean for

him and the disciples. The rap on the knuckles he gets from Jesus reminds him to look deeper and further than he thought was necessary.

What Jesus had to say about this new Promised Land didn't seem too good to Peter. It was not a land flowing with milk and honey. What Jesus proclaims is that the laws of this new Promised Land would turn the world upside down. While we live comfortably in a world where we can look after ourselves, the new kingdom would turn that upside down and ask us to disown yourself first. No wonder Peter turned to Jesus to rebuke him. This was dangerous stuff, and to mistake what was involved was to mistake the nature of God and his presence in Jesus. Loosing yourself in the tasks of the new Republic of God – what would I get out of that? What Jesus was trying to show Peter and the others was that once you accepted the vision of reality that Jesus gave, where it is God who is important and at the heart of life and world, where the divine values are central, where the world is nothing without God at its center, then the self can be seen for what it is, a part of God's creation and not the center of creation.

What is the point of gaining the whole world if all you have gained is as nothing before the reality of God? You lose by winning, for the self is lost in a world that in the reality of God has no meaning without God.

The presence of God, which Jesus affirms, makes a fundamental difference to our lives and Peter saw this. What he did not see at first was that it had some fundamental consequences for the way in which we live our lives and the way in which we see life. We climb the mountain of life, with all its frustrations and difficulties, not to get to the top and claim possession, but to engage in the quest, the effort and the agony of meeting and surmounting the difficulties. When Sir Edmund Hillary was asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, his answer was not in order to get to the top, but "because it is there!" The challenge of life is not in its destination, but in the act of living itself. And what Jesus gives us is an understanding of the ground rules by which we can live in the present, each and every day because God is present with us in the struggle. Our awareness of the presence is enough to turn us from self with its concerns and needs to the task of service to others and to our world. The world is not ours to own, but ours to serve – in the presence of God.

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

We are, like Peter and the disciples, being asked that question – a question that we cannot avoid: "Who do you think that I am?" How we answer that question will determine the kind of vision we have for our daily lives. Who, then, do you think that he is? Is he merely an interesting historical figure, a prophet for his own times, or is he the Son of God, our Saviour?