

Sermon
13 September 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Mark 8:27-38

“Who do people say I am?”

What a strange question for Jesus to ask!

In other words: “What is the gossip about me?” We would almost think that someone of Jesus’ stature would be above worrying about what others thought of him!

What does it matter what other people think in any case?

But in Biblical times things were different. Other people’s opinion about you mattered very much!

Let me elaborate: Who am I? My name is Jonanda Groenewald and I am the minister of the West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood. And this is true, whether you, or the people in the village outside, like it or not. I’ve got the paperwork to prove it.

In Biblical times, however, you could only be what the people around you allowed you to be. You could have papers galore – if the people didn’t see you as their minister (for instance), you *were not* their minister,

end of story. Your position in society was determined by the *people* amongst whom you lived, and by nothing else.

So Jesus wants to know if the people realize who he really is, because he was known as Jesus from Nazareth, the carpenter's son. Nobody to write home about. And he was hoping that after everything he's taught the people and done for them, that they would now start to realize that he was more than that...

But they had no idea. They thought that he could maybe be John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets... These were all important people, so at least the crowds started to realize that Jesus was no ordinary person, but they didn't know who he really was.

So then he asked his disciples, the people closest to him, the people who spend every minute of every day with him: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered: "You are the Christ." Bingo! He got it right! Jesus was the Son of God, the one God promised to send to change everything.

But then Jesus started explaining what it meant to be the Christ, and it turned out that Peter didn't have it right after all. He was expecting a messiah, a king, who would rule over them with power and might.

But this Christ had to die on the cross. That wasn't something any of Jesus' close friends wanted to hear or could understand. It just didn't make sense to them at all.

So like so many times before, Jesus had to explain to them what he meant. He said that anyone who wanted to come after him, had to deny himself, take up his cross and follow him.

So even though Jesus' disciples now realized who he was, they didn't understand what it meant. These words of Jesus must have come as quite a shock to them! Instead of one day soon becoming the new kings' 12 very important advisors, his right hand men, the ministers in his new parliament – they had to carry their crosses and follow him.

Why? Because *who were they?*

They were followers of the Christ, a group of people who later became known as Christians.

A group we all fall into. Christians.

So let me ask *you* these 2 very important questions this morning:

Who are you?

And who do people say that you are?

These 2 questions need to have the *same* answer in order for you to have credibility.

If you sit here today and think that you are a Christian, but nobody else thinks that, there is a discrepancy somewhere. Because no matter whom you are or what you do – if you are a Christian, people will know it. That's not the kind of thing you can hide.

Alexander the Great, as you all know – one of the greatest military generals who ever lived, and who conquered almost the entire known

world with his vast army, couldn't sleep one night during a campaign, and he left his tent to walk around the campgrounds.

As he was walking he came across a soldier asleep on guard duty. Now this was a very serious offence. The penalty for falling asleep on guard duty was, in some cases, instant death; the commanding officer sometimes poured lamp oil on the sleeping soldier and lit it.

The soldier began to wake up as Alexander the Great approached him. Recognizing who was standing in front of him, the young man feared for his life.

"Do you know what the penalty is for falling asleep on guard duty?" Alexander the Great asked the soldier.

"Yes, sir," the soldier responded in a quivering voice.

"Soldier, what's your name?" demanded the general.

"Alexander, sir."

Alexander the Great repeated the question: "What is your name?"

"My name is Alexander, sir," the soldier repeated.

A third time and more loudly Alexander the Great asked, "What is your name?"

A third time the soldier meekly said, "My name is Alexander, sir."

Alexander the Great then looked the young soldier straight in the eye.

“Soldier,” he said with intensity, “either change your name or change your conduct.”

We who carry the name of Christ and call ourselves Christians must live up to that name!

And that’s not always easy, as I am sure all of you will know very well. Because a Christian should walk in the footsteps of Jesus and try to live in the same way he did. Which implies that, sometimes, you’ll have to carry a cross too...

On a Saturday there is always lots of talk about sports in our house. My dad is a very loyal rugby fan, and his local team played against André’s old local team last night, and won! Something that doesn’t happen very often!

So my dad couldn’t wait to let us know what the score was! 36, 28. But if it was the other way around, I can assure you that we wouldn’t have heard from him at all! My mum always supported my dad’s team with her whole heart, not because she liked rugby, but because she couldn’t *live* with my dad if his team lost! My dad is a very big Golden Lions *fan*.

To be a *follower* is not the same thing as being a *fan*. To be a fan can be time consuming and sometimes even expensive – you need to buy tickets to go watch the games, you need to take the time off to watch the games, you need to buy the gear that shows you are a good supporter, and so forth. But that’s all. Apart from maybe shouting at the top of your voice during a game – there’s nothing more you need to do. You are a spectator, you sit and watch.

But a *follower* is somebody who needs to be in the game. You don't just sit at the sideline as a spectator, you participate. You need to do what your leader does. And you need to do this all the time. A true follower never takes a break from following. Following is a lifestyle, not a pastime or a hobby. It costs you nothing and everything at the same time.

We are not *fans* of Jesus, we are *followers*. We need to be in the game. And we need to stay in the game, whether we have a good season or not, whether we get injured or get a yellow card to let us know that we need to change our behaviour, or not, we need to stay in the game.

Another difference between a fan and a follower is that followers of Jesus don't need to worry about winning or losing – Jesus has already won. He's won the biggest battle of all, the battle against sin and death. There are no losers here.

But following can be tricky, especially when it comes to carrying your cross:

- It's really hard to reach out a hand of friendship to someone you don't really like. *But that's what Jesus did.*
- It's very difficult to forgive somebody who hurt you. Sometimes more than once. *But that's what Jesus did.*
- It's difficult to try and be there for others if you feel that your own world is falling apart. *But that's what Jesus did.*
- It's difficult to see the point of life when someone you loved very much dies. *But that's what God did.*

But there have been times in history when following literally meant dying – where people had a choice between living if they denied Christ and

dying if they didn't. The true followers in those times chose to die, because they knew that the reward would be worth it.

Our crosses have different forms and shapes. They are sometimes heavier than other times. But essentially that's part of being a Christian – carrying your cross and not giving up. Following Jesus – in the times when you want to sing and skip along, but also in the times that you can't muster up the energy to do anything more than drag your feet... *Because that's what Christians do, they follow Jesus. Always. No matter what.*

At least we know that our crosses won't ever be as heavy as the one Jesus had to carry. Jesus' cross was *literally a cross* – the horizontal beam of the cross he was to die on a few hours later. For us. And because of that, none of our crosses will ever be *too* heavy to carry. God even sent us his Spirit so we don't have to do the carrying alone.

So ask yourself again:

Who am I?

Who do people say I am?

And make sure that these 2 answers correspond.

It might mean that you won't be the most popular person around; that you'll have to make a few changes in your life, but believe me, the reward will be worth it!

Because Jesus said: "For whoever wants to save his live will lose it, but whoever loses his live for me and the gospel will save it."

Amen