

Sermon for Trinity 15. Malcolm Grundy

It is likely that some or most of you will end up disagreeing with me by the end of this sermon. There can be no doubt from our two readings about our subject. We have to ask ourselves, 'who is Jesus Christ for me today?'. My answer may be different from yours.

In the Epistle to the Philippians St Paul chooses his answer using an already known poem to emphasise Jesus the humble Son of God who emptied himself of this divinity and became a servant. And this in order, Paul says, 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow'. And rightly so.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey is helpful in the search for our own answer. He said that we might distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. He is right. If we only know the over analysed and dissected Jesus of history - the good man with those wise sayings - we only have half the story. If we only know the mystic Christ present in church and sacrament, but not in the world, we are missing something also.

I sometimes wonder what would be helpful in answering this question for a congregation like St Olaves. If, as I think, we are a 'cultural church' loving our music and our colourful choreographed liturgy there is another guide to help us. Although he first wrote a book called *Christ and Culture* in the early 1950s Richard Niebuhr's book remains on reading lists today.

He listed in a very connected way how belief in this Jesus emerges from and yet challenges the culture of any people, Christian or not. He says Christ can be against any culture - the Sermon on the Mount could not be more challenging. He also says Christ is within culture - within music, art, literature the possibilities summed up in Jesus can be felt. He then has a Christ transforming culture - by entering into a situation he changes it. Finally he has Christ above culture - judging us by how we fall short of all human possibilities as individuals and as we fail to protect and conserve our planet.

In today's gospel Jesus is pressed to say who he is - a prophet, Son of God, miracle worker or what. His answer is right for all time - 'but who do you say that I am?'. The question is the right one because every age and every believer has to give their own answer - and few will be the same.

We have to work out for ourselves the significance of Jesus Christ. Why does this person demand such special treatment? There are many more local places for us to go for help. In our St Olaves hymn book *Common Praise*, the name of Jesus is the first word in 21 hymns and Christ in 14 others. We do often say that much or most of our theology or common belief comes from hymns. Now that we cannot sing them, these pieces of poetry give titles for personal devotion. In familiar hymns these ring out - Jesus my shepherd, brother, friend - my prophet, priest, and king. The names are well known. Do we take our pick or do some mean much more than others to us at different times in life?

Where are my answers? If I say he speaks to me most when he talks about what the Kingdom of God will be like and how we can make a little of that happen here and now, some of you might say yes, yes. Others will say no, I believe in the divine Jesus for quite different reasons. Where we *will* agree is that our lives are shaped by this enigmatic Jesus who reveals God to each of us in both a personal and a universal way.

I was there when Patrick Appleford first introduced today's hymn to our preoccupied group of Directors of Education. We went into the chapel and before the midday eucharist and he just played through over and over that calming tune 'Living Lord'. There are times when this over-analysed Jesus Christ becomes real in an inexplicable way. So it was then and is now for me.

In Appleford's words:

*Your many gifts will make me new,
Into my life your power breaks through,
Living Lord.*