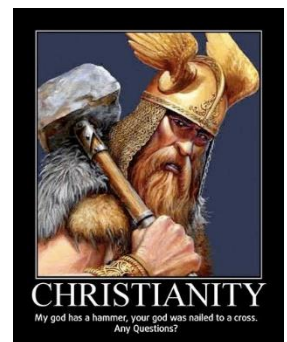


Sunday 27 August: Who do you say that I am? *Twenty Questions Jesus Asked and how they speak to us today*, by John Pritchard

As we continue our sermon series based on the book by John Pritchard, *Twenty questions Jesus asked and how they speak to us today*, we hear Jesus asking his disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Never mind what others say, what do you think?).

Almighty God, be at the centre of our minds, and of our hearts, and of our souls; that our whole lives may revolve around you. This we ask in Jesus' name, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

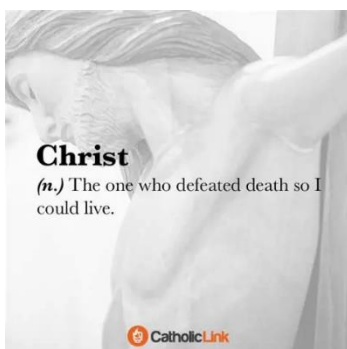
Many years ago, when I was growing my translation business, I did a lot of networking. I went to weekly formal business meetings and met with many professionals who all had their message to convey and their reputation to prove and establish. In the room were all sorts of business owners. Some in suits and ties, tradesmen in their overalls, sports trainers in their work clothes, and one, a successful electrician, once came to the meeting with a striking t-shirt. On it was the picture of the Norse mythology god Thor. The t-shirt said: My god has a hammer. Your god was nailed to a cross. Any questions?



Well yes, actually! I did have questions, for example, what kind of enemy has your god defeated? The man and I had an interesting conversation. Who said you cannot talk religion in business networking meetings?

But the point this man was making with his Norse god t-shirt is worth discussing, because as human beings, we all at one point project on others our own perception of what they should be like. Jewish people in first-century Palestine had their own perception of the Messiah, of course, that of a strong and victorious freedom leader. John Pritchard in his book asks us: 'What do we want from Christ?' Do we want him

to be a great human teacher? Yes, of course. Do we want him to be an all-time winner, one who zaps his enemies like a warrior of light in a video game? No. What about a kind of spiritual Zen master, offering comfortable piety to ease our days? No, not that either. In fact, what Jesus offers is *uncomfortable* piety. It is so much more comforting to imagine our Saviour in an aura of indisputable strength than in the terrible humiliation of the cross.



And yet. In his much acclaimed book *Dominion*, Tom Holland writes: 'To be a Christian is to believe that God became man, and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal has ever suffered. (...) The cross is the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It's the audacity of it, the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe.' Like I said to the man in the t-shirt: 'My God defeated death itself. What about yours?'

Who do you say that I am? asks Jesus.

Peter first got it totally right. And then, he got it terribly wrong. He saw the Messiah in Jesus, but he could not see what that idea really meant. When Jesus said he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again, that was intolerable to Peter. And so he rebuked Jesus: 'Lord, never, this shall never happen to you!'

Jesus' response must have shocked Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking like a human, when we need to focus on the concerns of God...' God, at the very centre of everything.

The whole life of Jesus was purely and simply an act of God. The real him, his centre, was focused on God.

From that moment on, the disciples started to realize that you could not separate the man from his father, you could not separate Jesus from God. The whole life of Jesus was purely and simply an act of God. The real him, his centre, was focused on God. The first disciples therefore understood an astonishing truth they had to come to terms with: they could not speak of Jesus without in some way speaking of God.

Who do we say that Jesus is?

We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but when we think of the man Jesus who calls us friends, we have to recognise that we have made a religious cult out of him, rather than simply following him. We worship Jesus more than we follow him.

And Jesus has never asked for our worship. He simply invites us to journey with him towards the kingdom of God, the blueprint of God for the good of humanity. In this alternative reality of the kingdom, Jesus took people from the edges of society and put them at the centre of things: lepers, blind folks, lame folks, prostitutes, children, tax collectors, the poor, the outcasts.

The key way in which Jesus lived was that he let go of ego and self-interest and gave himself to God and to others. His was a path of self-emptying. He emptied himself in the incarnation, he emptied himself when helping others, he emptied himself most of all on the cross. And he told his disciples, and us, that the only way to live was to die to ourselves and to give ourselves away, because only those who lose their lives will save them.

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So being a Christian is not just about making a few adjustments to our normal, comfortable lives, it's about finding a new centre to our lives, and to that end, Jesus himself shows us the way: the way of the cross.



My maternal grandmother was from Brittany, where you find calvaries everywhere. She once gave me a beautiful book with photos of dozens of calvaries and their history. They range from very simple to very elaborate, with scenes of the life of Christ, and always, at the top, the cross. Old, rugged, a constant reminder that the way of the cross is not the way of modern society. They seem to point us in a different direction, towards something much taller, much bigger than us.

The cross that Jesus asks us to pick up and carry points us to two different things: a way of life, and the concerns of God.

In this new light, then, who do we say that Jesus is?

Servant king, he calls us to seek not greatness, but to become small and focus on the well-being of others;

Faithful friend, he is with us, in joy and in sorrow, and never lets go of us;

Prophetic teacher, he inspires and challenges us to a deeper concern for the world, to fight against the rulers of this world who cause suffering and oppression;

Loving shepherd, he calls us to follow him when the world is loveless, and to be witnesses to the things of God;

Life-saver, he defeated the powers of darkness within us and around us, offering peace and hope to the world.

Who do you say that I am? asks Jesus.

Our response can be in the words of the song which, repeated like a prayer, writes itself in our minds and in our hearts and transforms us so that we find a new centre to our lives, and we start living outwards from that new centre, in the footsteps of our Redeemer:

Jesus

Name above all names

Beautiful Saviour

Glorious Lord

Emmanuel

God is with us

Blessed Redeemer

Living word

Jesus

Lord God Almighty

Wonderful counsellor

The prince of peace

Above glory

Man of sorrow

Man of God

