

As they walk along the road, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say I am?”, and then even more specifically, “Who do you say I am?”. If we think about it, it is not the sort of question that we might expect anyone to ask. Which of us would ask someone, “Who you say I am?”. So, what is Jesus doing? The way we might make sense of it is to consider it, not from the point of view of Jesus asking the question, but from the point of view of the disciples who are trying to work out for themselves who Jesus is. After all, he had appeared on the scene from nowhere and had done some remarkable things. So, who was he – a healer, a wise teacher, a prophet, a miracle worker? Who was he?

We might like to think of the disciples who try to answer this question as being like an artist who is trying to paint a portrait of someone. If you ever listen to an artist explaining what they are doing you will know that is not just a matter of getting all the physical features right. They also try to portray something of the character of the person. A good artist will usually do a lot of research about the person they are going to paint or even interview them. The artist will try to discover something that is true about the person, but which might not be well known. Cartoonists do something similar, but often they draw a caricature of the person. It might not be what the person is really like, but rather create an image of what most people think the person is like.

I think there is something of that going on in the gospel. Peter answers Jesus’ question by responding, “You are the Christ”. This is a good answer, and it says that Peter has been trying to work out who Jesus is. In calling him the Christ, Peter is saying that Jesus is God’s anointed. Of course, everyone had been waiting a long time for God’s anointed to appear. They also had a particular view of God’s anointed one which didn’t include the anointed one suffering. This is where Peter gets a shock when Jesus tells him that the Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously, be rejected, put to death, and then three days later to rise. Peter tells Jesus that that can’t happen – because Jesus is the anointed one of God.

The story of Peter answering the question doesn’t end with today’s gospel. In fact, we will watch him and the other disciples trying to work out who Jesus is right until the day he dies, and then for a long time after the resurrection. I think there are stages the disciples have to go through before they really know who Jesus is. It begins with knowledge – knowing some facts

about Jesus: that he cast out demons, that he cured the sick, that he fed the hungry and so on. But facts are not enough. Knowledge can lead to understanding – which is getting to know him at a deeper level than simply the surface facts. They begin to see the meaning underneath the things he says and does. As understanding develops, they will find themselves deepening their trust in him. Once this happens, they are in a relationship with him, they become his companions, and he guides their lives. They don't just know about him; they know him. This then shapes the way they talk about him to others. They don't just give information about Jesus; they invite people into a relationship with Jesus.

I think it is useful for us to ask how this gospel plays out in our own time. We might wonder what people believe today about Jesus. The answer can be as varied as it might have been at the time of Peter and the other disciples. Some may see him as a wise teacher who gave the world an ethical framework for living. Some may see him as an historical figure who did a lot of good. While these responses are true, they don't quite say what Peter said when he called Jesus the Christ. These responses seem to operate at the level of knowledge, but don't get very far in understanding who Jesus is. Peter's response was an expression of faith. Many people can know Jesus or know about Jesus, but not have faith. It is generally recognised that in a society like ours, faith is not supported the way it once was, and the number of people who identify as having faith has been growing smaller for a few decades now. There was a time when it was socially difficult not to believe in Jesus – society expected this of people. Today it is the opposite.

The question Jesus asks today is not just for us to answer personally. But once we have answered it, the task is to live as his disciples in our world today. How do we support people – indeed, the next generations – to come to know and trust Jesus, and to have a personal relationship with him? There are two ways that I would like to suggest today. The first is to be a community that welcomes people and nurtures their faith. Faith is always passed on in communities of faith. The second is to be conscious of the portrait of Jesus that we paint for people. The portrait the gospel gives us is of someone who welcomed people, sat down and ate with them, and drew them into the family of God. Now this is an attractive portrait.