**Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ** 2/6/24dkm

Read: Malachi 4, Mark 8:22-38

Text: Mark 8:22-30

Psalms: 118:19-29, 62:5-12, 31:1-7, 134

On our trip to India last year, we made the effort to visit a dear friend, the daughter of our house-help; we visited her also, a woman about our age. This daughter was a believer like her mother. But some years ago, she had a brain tumour removed. It is wonderful that she is still alive to raise her three children, but the operation left her blind. Do you know anyone who is blind- physically blind I mean?

Speaking of India, I recall our first year as missionaries. This year was spent learning the local language. Day by day we learnt ‘dialogues’ as they were called. We learnt grammar and new words. I recall writing out a Sunday School lesson to teach children who played near our house. The thing about learning a new language is when you start to think in this language.

It is often like this with becoming a Christian, a true believer in Jesus Christ. Growing up in a Christian home we hear Bible stories, learn Bible verses and sing Bible songs. In church and in school, or even in the media, we hear the gospel preached. We think about and consider what we hear, until one day, by the grace of God, it all makes sense. We will be on our knees in prayer when we are hit by the realization that the gospel is true, as we confess Jesus Christ to be our Saviour and Lord.

The disciples had been with Jesus for a couple of years, listening to him teach about the kingdom of God and seeing him heal lots of people, not to mention feed five thousand and then four thousand with just five loaves and seven loaves of bread respectively, and a few fish. And then, as he walked and talked with them on the road to Caesarea Philippi, Peter, as their representative confessed, ‘You are the Christ’ (8:29). This becomes a turning point in Mark’s gospel. Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, where he must be killed and after three days rise again (8:31).

In the passage before us we have two accounts of men being given sight: the blind man in Bethsaida, and the ‘blind’ disciples (cf.8:18).

**1.The blind man in Bethsaida**

After feeding the five thousand, and then being confronted by the Pharisees, Jesus went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He returned to the Decapolis where he healed a man who was deaf and dumb, and fed four thousand men. Back in Galilee, he was again challenged by Pharisees, before going back across the lake, where he healed a blind man, in the account we are looking at today (8:22). There is something of a pattern here- two miracles of feeding and two healings. The disciples were present all during this time, but as Jesus said to them in the boat, ‘Having eyes, do you not see? (8:18). Mark alone of the four gospel writers records this healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, another miracle witnessed by the disciples, a miracle pointing, it would seem, to their spiritual blindness.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived on the north-east shore of the lake, a blind man was brought to him by family or friends; being blind he needed someone to show him the way. They begged Jesus to touch him; they wanted Jesus to heal him not just give a word of blessing (8:22). Jesus proceeded to take the blind man by the hand and lead him out of the town. No doubt a noisy and distracting crowd had gathered to see Jesus. Jesus wanted the full attention of this blind man even though he could not see him. He probably spoke to him, though no words are recorded.

What we are told is that Jesus spat on his eyes and put his hands on him (8:23). Remember, he could not see so touch was important- although Jesus similarly touched the tongue of the deaf and dumb man (7:33). Jesus could and did heal people from a distance, as with the daughter of the woman in Tyre, but with this man he chose to touch him. In all his healings Jesus looked for faith, and it was the same here. Remember, Jesus was compassionate and healed all who came to him, but he was more than a medical doctor. Jesus healed as a sign of who he was. ‘Who do men say that I am?’ is the question he put to his disciples in the following verse (8:27).

When Jesus spat on this man’s eyes, he looked up and said, ‘I see men like trees, walking’ (8:24). If the man was born blind, he would not have been able to identify trees so readily. In any case, these ‘trees’ were walking. Trees walking would have been people! It is not easy for us to ‘see’ just what this man saw, but clearly, he was not seeing clearly. Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes again and made him look up, and this time he saw everyone clearly (8:25). He would have seen the face of Jesus.

Are we to understand that he saw more than physical realities? He could see spiritual realities while physically blind, of course. Are we to see this man restored to a whole human being by Jesus? This is the only case in which Jesus’ healing was not instant, yet it was not a long process of restoration. As suggested, this opening of the eyes of the blind man may be seen in relation to the opening of the eyes of Peter in the next story.

Jesus had taken this blind man out of town before restoring his sight with a spit and a touch- there was nothing medicinal about the spit of course, and nothing magical about the touch. It was by the power of God that he was healed. Jesus was showing this man that he was the Son of God.

Jesus sent this man away now that he could see clearly. He told him to go straight home and not tell anyone in the street what had happened (8:26). Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to die. He did not want people wanting to make him king, as happened the last time he was in Bethsaida (John 6:15).

**2. The blind disciples**

After healing the blind man at Bethsaida, Jesus went with his disciples up to a place in the foothills of Mt Hermon, a place called Caesarea Philippi (8:27). He wanted a quiet place to be with them, and it seems he finally found such a place. As with the Phoenician coast and the Decapolis, it was a predominantly Gentile and pagan place. It was the headwaters of the Jordan River, a place where idols to Baal and the Greek god Pan were located, along with a temple to Caesar. I am reminded of the glacier at the headwaters of the Ganges River. Hindus go on pilgrimage to this holy place. Jesus was not on a pilgrimage to this place; he was on his way to Jerusalem where he must ‘be killed and after three days rise again’ (8:31).

‘Who do men say that I am?’ was the first question Jesus put to his disciples (8:27). Jesus had become well known as he travelled around healing the sick, casting out demons and preaching the kingdom of God. Poor villagers and widows followed Jesus, and the religious leaders came all the way from Jerusalem to investigate. Even Herod heard about him. What were people saying about Jesus?

Messianic expectations were at a high in this time of Roman occupation. The Jews were looking for a divinely-sent deliverer to free them from the Romans. The Scriptures spoke of an ‘anointed one’ so the Jews were on the lookout. They were also watching for the prophet Elijah to return, according to the words of Malachi 4:5. John the Baptist was asked if he was Elijah (John 1:21). Herod and maybe others thought Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead, even though John actually baptised Jesus (6:16).

In answer to Jesus’ question, the disciples said that some, like Herod, were saying he was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Others were saying he was Elijah, probably because of what was written in Malachi. Still others said he was one of the prophets (8:28). In a parallel passage, Matthew mentions the name of Jeremiah, a major prophet in Israel (Mat 16:14). Jeremiah came preaching repentance, as in repent and return to the Lord because God is going to destroy the wicked in Jerusalem and Judea. In the apocryphal book of 2Maccabees reference is made to Jeremiah having taken the ark and the altar of incense and buried them in a cave before Jerusalem was destroyed.

Many ideas were circulating as to the person of Jesus. Still today, many ideas are circulating as to the person of Jesus. No other person in history has had as many books written and movies made about him than Jesus of Nazareth. I heard the musical ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ is coming again. People are still asking who Jesus is, and with good reason. He is unlike anyone else in history, and one day everyone will have to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. For today, people often retell what others have said because they are too lazy to read the Bible themselves. Let me urge you to read the Bible and see for yourself what Jesus says.

The disciples told Jesus what others were saying about him, but then Jesus put them on the spot with another question: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ (8:29). This question was addressed to all twelve disciples but Peter, as their self-appointed spokesman, answered. And what an amazing answer he gave. Peter of course, was the one who stepped out of the boat to walk on the water towards Jesus. But he was also rebuked by Jesus for his ‘little faith’ (Mat 14:29-30) - in contrast to the ‘great faith’ of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mat 15:28). Jesus also rebuked Peter when he tried to tell Jesus that he was wrong (8:33).

“Peter answered and said to him, ‘You are the Christ’” (8:29, Mat 16:16). Peter, like all Jews, was looking for Messiah, and like all Jews was looking for a politically powerful deliverer. He saw Jesus demonstrate divine power almost every day. He heard about the kingdom of heaven, about repentance and forgiveness of sin almost every day. So he came to accept Jesus as the Messiah or Christ.

Peter believed and confessed that this Jesus whom he had followed for quite some time was indeed the Messiah, and as Matthew records, ‘the Son of the living God’ (Mat 16:16) - not ‘a Son’ but ‘the Son’. He was the Son not of a dead god or idol but of the living God, the God who made the heavens and the earth and who rules over his creation. Peter confessed Jesus as nothing less than the Son of the living God. He was not Elijah or Jeremiah or any other prophet. He was not just a prophet but the Son of God- fully God and fully man.

Matthew writes that Jesus applauded Peter’s answer saying, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven’ (16:17). Mark immediately jumps to Jesus warning his disciples not to tell anyone he was Messiah, probably so that they would not get the wrong idea about Messiah (8:30). Matthew records Jesus blessing Peter as a result of this confession.

Divine blessing is a gift, as is faith itself. While Peter had been watching Jesus and listening to him for many days, it was not human reasoning, or as Jesus puts it, ‘flesh and blood’, that brought about this confession. We are calling it a confession not just an acknowledgement; Wikipedia calls it an assumption! In the early church the confession was, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and the apostle Paul says that no one can say this except by the Holy Spirit (1Cor 9:22). Saying ‘Jesus is Lord’ was to invite persecution. For Peter it was to invite the wrath of the Jews and expulsion from the synagogue (John 9:22).

What Jesus saw in Peter’s confession was the hand of his Father who is in heaven (Mat 16:17). It was God, by his Spirit, working in the heart of this man that brought about this confession. Peter was not just saying what Jesus wanted to hear- he was speaking from his heart. It was not just emotion either- he understood what he was saying. Understanding who Jesus is, is not easy for anyone. Indeed, we cannot understand who Jesus is unless God first moves in our hearts. Why is this? Because we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). Jesus told Peter that ‘My Father’ has revealed this to you. This comment confirms what Peter confessed, namely that Jesus is the Son of the living and true God. Is this what you believe, and confess?