

## Luke in Your Neighbourhood 8 Confessing Christ.

Luke 9:18-27

Everyone, it seems, loves a TV quiz. Sometimes the contestants get it right, and come out smiling. Other times, they either forget something they know perfectly well or reveal that they didn't know as much as they had hoped they did. But at least the only things that hang on their getting the right answer are the prize and the glow of satisfaction.

However there are some questions that, depending on your answer, will change your life forever. 'Is this the path we should take to get down the mountain?' Get the answer wrong and you could be heading for disaster. 'Is this the person I should marry?' Get that one wrong - either way - and you face lasting unhappiness. And so on.

Jesus' question about who his followers thought He was is a question like that. It wasn't a quiz, sitting around the campfire one night and seeing what people think, but then going on much as before. He needed to know that they had got the message, that they had worked it out.

It wasn't an easy question, because 'God's Messiah' was supposed to do various things that Jesus hadn't done. The coming Messiah, the 'anointed King', was supposed to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. He was supposed to defeat the enemy armies, the pagans. And he was supposed to bring justice and peace to the world by establishing a new rule, a new way of governing God's people and God's world. And though Jesus had done remarkable things he hadn't actually done any of those.

So what would you say, sitting round a fire with his followers? You might play safe, and agree with the people they quoted. "People say you're a prophet, like one of the great ones we've read about in the Bible." Or are you ready to take a deep breath, push out of boat of your life into deep water, and blurt out the conclusion that Peter and the others were coming to?

'You're God's Messiah!' 'You're the King, the Coming One. You're not just a prophet. You're the one we've been waiting for! That answer has immediate consequences. If you think Jesus is the Messiah, then you are committed to following Him, even when he tells you that he's off to the big city to die. This wasn't just a quiz.

Are you ready for that? Many people today, even many Christians, really do believe that the point of life is 'to be true to yourself' or 'to find out who you really are' and then try to live like that. Jesus stands all that on its head. 'If you want to gain your life, you have to lose it.'

If we have understood Luke's story so far, with its strong hints of opposition from the Pharisees on the one hand and Herod on the other, it will come as no surprise that Jesus at once tells not just the twelve, but anyone who wants to follow Him that there is a dark and dangerous time ahead. The world is being turned upside down (or the right way up), and anyone who wants to come through and be present when God's kingdom appears will have to be prepared to be turned upside down and inside out with it. Despite what many well-meaning preachers and evangelists have said, Jesus didn't come with the message that if we followed him, we would have an easy life, with everything happening exactly as we would like it. Just the reverse. To save your life, you have to lose it. To avoid having 'the son of man' be ashamed of you, you have to acknowledge him. In other words, when the Messiah is installed as judge of God's world, which was a central part of Jewish expectation, then only those who have been prepared to follow him when it is dangerous and shameful to do so will be acknowledged by him in return.

Jesus' swift movement from asking who they think he is to summoning them to follow him even to death, shows clearly enough that we cannot separate thinking from action as Christians. As Jesus said earlier, it's no use saying 'Lord, Lord,' (Luke 6:46) if you don't do what He says. Jesus' identity and

his vocation are tied so tightly together that if you want to have anything to do with him you have to take the whole package or nothing at all. There are no half measures in the Kingdom of God. And as we contemplate that challenge let's be careful to note that Luke records that at the start of this conversation and the next story of the Transfiguration these tremendous revelations of truth and vocation took place when Jesus had been praying: no half measures there either!!

The Contemporary Church in the UK today is assailed on every side: its face is set like flint towards Jerusalem (not the one of Jesus' day but the New one to which Jesus will return). Its journey is very similar and cross-centred, and whilst we might wish everyone in Canterbury to think well of St Andrews and indeed the whole Body of Christ the odds are that increasingly they won't. In a society that has increasingly ditched any absolutes or objective truths, and where almost anything is increasingly acceptable, a group of people who embrace objective truth, like that in our Bibles, will more and more be considered to be out of date, judgemental, and undesirable to our make believe world of synthetic peace.

Yes see, Taking Up His Cross daily is not "we all have our crosses to bear": it is choosing every moment with the help of the Holy Spirit to live radically different lives today, going against the flow, and being prepared for all that happened to Jesus to happen to you if necessary. Christian Theology has always divided us as humans into Body, Soul & Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23): much of our energy as Church is put into the Spirit bit but actually that's the bit we can least influence. Someone is either Born Again or not: their spirit is brand new and it resonates with the Holy Spirit opening relationship and communication with the Father and Jesus in a dynamic transformative way. The soul is the battleground: our mind, will and emotions. Here Jesus the lover and restorer of our soul with the help of the Spirit renews our mind more and more (one degree of glory to another) bringing it into line with the

mind of Christ, renews and strengthens our will and brings it more and more into line with the Fathers Will (thy Will be done), and renews our emotions so that we begin more and more to feel as he feels and then act as he acts. Gain the whole world and forfeit your soul: that seems to be the clear demarcation point here. Now based on what I am saying you might be led to think that the Christian Church must be dying for who would take on such a commitment: but you would be wrong. Bible society statistics say clearly that across the world there are now 33% Christians, some 2.4 billion. In China alone there are now over 100 million Christians, and that in a country where its Communists overlords have said for 60 years that God is dead, and whose economy is the biggest in the world and expanding.

So don't buy into the lie of all this subjective nonsense that's around today however well it's wrapped up and packaged. As Christians we have drawn a line on the sand of our lives and chosen to follow Christ and if I know one thing only, it is that He will never let us down. I was recently reading some research on massive lottery winners, which shows what misery and havoc has often come to their lives as a result and to the point where they wish they had not won anything in the first place. The 'Whole World' says come and gain me: what a fallacy and a hollow temptation that is. Real People opt not for cheap grace but the real thing and the journey of salvation they then travel is a modern day pilgrims progress and as exciting.

Christianity you see is not a religious crutch for the weaker of us, it's the most costly and demanding of journeys. It asks for everything and then gives you everything: but not the everything of the worlds economics, the everything that's worth having, the pearl of great price, the everything that will last forever. Confessing Christ will change your life: of that there is no doubt but be prepared for the roller coaster ride of your life and an adventure second to none!!

So imagine that you are sitting around the fire and listen to Jesus asking you, 'Who do you say I am?' Tell Him your answer. Tell Him how much you love Him, and what things you find difficult. Then ask Him to give you a share in His courage, to follow Him wherever He leads and whatever it costs.

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January 27<sup>th</sup> 2014.