



# Observing Jesus

## Mark 8:27-30

In our sophisticated Western world, we do say some unusual things in our everyday communication:

- “It’s raining cats and dogs.”
- “Who do you think you are – Jack Brabham?”
- “Have you been to milk the cow?”

I recall my father giving directions to someone and saying that he would come to “a fork in the road”. I could not help myself, as a small boy with a vivid imagination, picturing an eating utensil rising from the centre of the highway!

Jesus comes to a fork in the road, for it has been probably two and a half years since he had called the disciples to follow him and they had embarked on their journey of discovery. On that day at Caesarea Philippi, we find out how their discipleship has taken shape. They arrive at a watershed, a hill top - a moment of decision.

There is an urgency about following Jesus Christ which none of us can avoid. The moments of decision call us to understand the importance of facing up to life’s challenge. My favourite dentist story is of a tough taskmaster who suggested to his patients that they brush and floss daily - brush after every meal and floss every morning and evening. When one busy businessman protested that he could not possibly hold to the regimented approach, the dentist said, “Alright then, just brush and floss the teeth you want to keep.” Taking Jesus seriously is a challenge which involves choices on our part.

There are many occasions in the gospels where the disciples observe Jesus as he engages in his ministry.

They watched him, for example, as he touched the outcasts and as he was invited into a Pharisee’s home (Luke 14). There were others who were observing him with a much more sinister intention. Such people were listening intently to all that he said and were watching very carefully the kind of people he was mixing with. The purpose of these mostly religious leaders was to disrupt his mission.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, as you read the gospel, there is something significant happening and critically important in terms of Jesus’ relationship with his disciples.

From their place of observation, the disciples can see what is now behind them – and were invited to consider what lies ahead. Whilst this is true throughout the whole of his ministry, it is most appropriate to note at this point in time.

- in looking back, they could observe the crowds, preaching, popular acclaim, healings and miracles
- in looking forward, they might make some wrong assumptions, because the crowds will slip away, the skies will darken, and all roads will lead to Jerusalem.

It seems to me that this can fairly be described as a “watershed moment”. It is a time to look back – and a time to anticipate the future.



It would be good for us to relate our own journey of discipleship to the ministry of Jesus and the challenge of the incident at Caesarea Philippi. This is without doubt a “fork in the road” moment, as they observe Jesus and one that they cannot avoid. We too have such moments – and so as we observe Jesus, we allow what is happening at this critical gospel moment to help interpret and guide our own lives as we move forward and choose God’s way.

### **The identification of Jesus Christ was clear**

The setting of Caesarea Philippi was specific. It was in the far north, towards the Lebanon, at the source of the River Jordan in the foothills of Mount Hermon. This place was important:

- it was beyond the Galilee and outside of Herod’s patch
- it had a chequered religious history. Evidence of Baal worship and the temple of Pan is to be found here
- it was a rather unexpected place for the Messiah to be recognised
- it was an appropriate place for Jesus to challenge the disciples regarding his identity.

Jesus wanted to be clear as to whether Peter had an understanding which differed in any way from that of the rest of the people. You can even say that Jesus was preparing Peter for leadership of the church. Peter has a break-through of perception and articulates what perhaps others had thought, but they had hesitated to say.

As you observe Jesus in these moments and you listen to what he has to say, a clearer picture comes to mind of who Jesus is – but it will take the journey to the cross and through to resurrection for the disciples to begin to grasp this and for Jesus to want it to be made public.

You can interpret Mark’s gospel in terms of a series of challenges. There is a whole succession of them from John the Baptist onwards. The purpose seems to be the need to be clear about the kind of discipleship that Jesus calls us to. Few seemed to be recognising this, but in their conversation it becomes apparent that Peter does.

- he (and perhaps others) is making progress - 8:29
- however, it becomes painfully clear that they did not fully comprehend his identity and what it would mean - 8:32-33.

In the Gospel of Mark (8:34-38), we read about the cost of discipleship. 8:34 sums up the way Jesus calls us to follow Him.

- to leave self behind
- to take up the cross
- to come with Him.

Many Christians today, especially in the Western world, are not called to bear suffering, rejection and death. Although for an increasing number in the world, people are suffering for Jesus Christ. How can anyone remain unmoved at the scenes at a Mass in France, where the elderly French priest, Father Jacques Hamel, had his life taken from him while he conducted worship?



In the lifetime of many here, thousands of Christians have suffered. Hundreds of clergy and laity alike lost their lives in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich. Many have been killed in the political struggles of South America, in the mission stations of Africa and the twentieth century had its own martyrs.

- Maximilian Lolbe - exchanged places with a condemned Jew in the concentration camp and was starved, before being fatally injected with carbolic acid
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer - a minister of the Confessing Church
- Archbishop Romero - gunned down whilst celebrating God's presence in his Catholic Church.

For every well-known martyr, there are thousands who are known by few. As Jesus prepared the first followers for his impending suffering and subsequent death, he needed to be sure that they had some understanding as to who he was. The whole of the ministry of Jesus is an opportunity for the disciples to observe him and, in doing so, to gain a greater understanding as to who he is and what their calling can mean.

There can seem to be a huge gap between our understanding of Jesus Christ and the specific challenge we face today. However, I am certain there is a link: if we share God's distinctive calling, then the totality of our lives is wholeheartedly put at God's disposal. We recognise that Jesus gave priority to those outside the structures of the religious community. We must ensure our buildings are not to be cleaned and polished for our own private use, but put to the service of God in community. This is not something that Wesley Mission has ever had to struggle with, because that is exactly the kind of community we are.

### **The identification of Jesus Christ was arrived at by induction and inspiration**

Having established that Peter's confession was distinctive, we can see from the text that the information was not furnished by Jesus. The link between induction and inspiration was very significant.

- induction from their experience of his character and works ... being alongside him and seeing him with tax collectors, lepers and outcasts
- inspiration from God (Matthew 16:17) ... distinctive contribution to the study of this passage.

The two ways in which the disciples identified Jesus are complementary and not mutually exclusive.

"The Christ" in Greek and "Messiah" in Hebrew and Aramaic means "The Anointed One". The term carries a mark of authority and consecration for a particular task. Not only was it of divine choice, but as empowering for the task. The disciples had looked on and seen so much in Jesus that could not be explained in terms of this world. They believed there was more.

- why do you think that it took the disciples so long to make the discovery of who he was? There were so many pointers in his actions and his response to human need
- how can we help people to make that discovery today? Our evangelism needs to be profoundly linked to a fresh discovery in our own culture
- Jesus is acknowledged by many of the world's religions as a prophet - but he is so much more. What is that extra dimension that people need to discover?



Caesarea Philippi was a great turning point for the disciples. At last they will see that Jesus Christ is who he is, but we have to admit it was only momentary. And even when Peter, their spokesperson, gets it right with “*You are the Christ*” (v.29) he immediately gets it very wrong (v.33) so that Jesus has to give him one of the strongest rebukes found in the Bible.

The turning point is one which involves being realistic about the challenge, but also about themselves. A New Yorker cartoon with a powerful message, in the light of the Titanic film, shows two or three lifeboats in the sea - and a woman turns to her husband to ask, “Alfred, are we still in first class?” Does it really matter?

The moment involved a degree of self-awareness on Peter’s part - not only towards the ministry of Jesus, but also his own response. Likewise, we today come face to face with the challenge of our place in the community and context in which we find ourselves.

As we observe Jesus, we seek to capture a vision of what it means to follow him today.

### **The great significance of the moment**

Peter’s declaration served to open up the journey to the cross. In this way, it is a fork in the road. Jesus Christ calls his disciples to follow him in earnest on the road that leads to the cross.

The term “Messiah” is found seven times in Mark’s Gospel, but only on three occasions in the sayings of Jesus - 9:41; 12:35; 13:21. His reluctance to use the title is probably explained by the many contemporary misconceptions that existed.

Mark has a revelatory theme, revolving around the concept of a secret. You will find out, but you won’t until the right moment – a moment of his choosing.

Mark has no hesitation in identifying Jesus as the Christ in the first verse of his gospel (1:1), but by then he had realised what a very different kind of Messiah Jesus was:

- the way he came - his fulfilment of so many Old Testament scriptures. This is all the more real, once we understand the link
- the words he spoke - his teaching, so clear and simple, and yet, full of such authority. He taught with such authority
- the way he lived - neither his closest friends nor his bitterest enemies could find anything wrong with his character. The holiness he taught was the holiness he lived
- the works he demonstrated - his miracles of compassion and power. He reached out to those in deepest need
- the way he died - this convinced a world-weary centurion (Mark 15:39)
- the confirmation of all this is made plain as he is raised from the dead.

There still remains the most important question of all - “Who do you say I am?” This question will never go away.

The answer to the question is the beginning of real life - and if continued exploration - bringing new life every day!



The importance of the passage is that Jesus reveals to his disciples the meaning of his mission, which will take him from here to Jerusalem and death. His journey to death and resurrection is linked to their role as disciples. They too are to take up their cross and follow him on his journey (v.34). As we have seen, discipleship means following Jesus in the way of suffering and service.

I have a great love for the West Country of England, not surprisingly because I began my ministry there 37 years ago - and Plymouth is a great city. Its link with Sir Francis Drake is known the world over. At first, Drake had difficulty recruiting staff. He would gather young men on hillsides overlooking the sea and tell them of the beautiful sights and gentle breezes. Few ever signed up, however inviting it sounded.

Drake changed his strategy for recruitment and told stories to possible recruits of the hardships they would have to endure. He told them of the gales that would blow them off course for days, no water on the ship, etc. – and his recruits were many! This was the approach that Jesus used – and his compelling call is not one of ease and leisure.

Our challenge is in:

- a multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society
- a community of family life is less stable and more diverse than ever before
- a context where authority and respect for traditional institutions has diminished
- an Australia which has become more prosperous, at the same time as a significant and widening minority experience poverty and social exclusion
- a context where explanations and expressions of spirituality are more diverse and less authentically Christian
- a setting where we must still name the Name.

Observing Jesus leads us to the point of declaring him to others. As we have just experienced the excitement of the Olympiad, all of us can reflect upon our personal attempts at sports. Apart from cross country running, most of the sports that I have engaged in have been team sports. I have learned the hard way that there is one strategy that is damaging to the result of any game – and that is to never sit on a lead. Once you do that, the other team gain the upper hand.

A growing church, a Christian community seeking to make a real impact, will never “sit on the lead”. Complacency is our greatest peril. When the disciples began to grasp just who Jesus was, they had to face the world and offer the wonderful good news – which will be saving news for all!