

Who is Jesus? As you can see from that vox pop, there is a wide variety of answers to that question, and in today's passage we see a few more. But why is it important to establish Jesus' identity? Why do Christians stress the importance of knowing who Jesus is? Well, let me give you an illustration where identity is important. A friend of mine was recently at a party near the bush, and as she was walking around she was bitten by a spider. Unfortunately she didn't really get a good look at the spider and wasn't sure what type it was. For her, knowing the identity of the spider was of high importance. If it was a Funnel web she would have to go to a hospital for the anti-venom, if it was a huntsman she would just be sore for a little while. The identity of the spider was incredibly important because her following actions depended on that information. In the first half of today's sermon we will see Jesus ask the question, "who do you say I am?" And like my friend with the spider, there are implications for the answer. So in the second half we will see Jesus explain the implications both for himself and for the disciples.

So Who is Jesus?

So far in our Luke sermon series we have seen Jesus tempted in the desert and then the parable of the sower. These don't seem particularly remarkable and may make you wonder why the sudden focus on who Jesus is. But our sermon series has skipped a few chapters so I want to fill in some of the gaps so far. Jesus had driven out an evil spirit, healed many people including a man with leprosy and a paralytic, he raised a boy from the dead, calmed a storm, raised a girl from the dead and just before asking this question has miraculously fed 5000 people from just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. I think if you saw all these things you would be asking the same question who is this man Jesus? Who is this man who can do such amazing things? In fact people were asking questions. Just earlier in this chapter even King Herod starts wondering who Jesus is. And the word on the street according to Jesus disciples in verse 19, is that Jesus was John the Baptist, or Elijah or a prophet.

You see Jesus was calling for repentance and performing miracles just like some of the old testament prophets had. So some people assumed he was a prophet. But although he was doing these things and is indeed sometime called the last prophet it wasn't the complete story. The problem with these answers is that they are only part of the truth. Jesus was a prophet, but he was a lot more.

It actually sounds a little like today when people only partially understand who Jesus is. I am not saying that if you asked someone down at Westfields the question who do you think Jesus is? that they would answer John the Baptist or Elijah, but as you heard people say in the video at the beginning, they think that Jesus was just a good teacher or was just a good morale person or as some other religions today claim that Jesus was just a prophet. And although there is truth about these ideas they are not the complete story, if that is all they see of Jesus they are denying who he really is. That is why we say things like the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed to make sure we know exactly who Jesus really is.

So we know who the 'public' say Jesus is, now we come to Peter's answer to Jesus' question who do you say I am? and Peter answers that Jesus is the Christ of God.

This title 'Christ of God' meant so much more than just a prophet.

For the Jews the Christ meant anointed one, another way of saying the promised king from God, all through the Old Testament they were looking forward to the day when the Christ will come, he will bring a new creation, he would allow God's people to be able to worship and praise him, he would judge the nations.

Something to understand at this point was that a lot of Jews thought that the Christ would be the one who was going to save Israel from their oppressors' (being ROME at this time) and bring peace in the world that they were living.

Peter had got it right, Jesus was the Christ, he would do all these things. But Jesus immediately responds with two statements. firstly he tells the disciples not to tell anyone. Doesn't that seem strange? I mean up until now Luke has been asking the question "who is Jesus? And finally the disciples get it right, they correctly identify Jesus as the Christ and then he tells them not to tell anyone?

A reason for this could be due to what the disciples thought Christ meant. Remember earlier I had mentioned that the Jews were expecting the Christ to kick out the Romans, well if this word spread around, it would have caused an uproar, with Jews expecting Jesus to set up a kingdom here on earth. This is not why Jesus was sent into this world. Jesus wanted to continue telling people about the good news of salvation. You see, Jesus knew the disciples did not fully understand what being the Christ meant. So instead of them passing on half truths he said that they should not say anything.

Then we come to the second statement where Jesus explains to his disciples what it actually means to be the Christ.

(P) In verse 22 he says “The Son of Man (referring to himself) must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” This sounds very different from the Jew’s thought that Christ meant, doesn’t it?

In this verse Jesus is describing what else the Old Testament had to say about the messiah. Jesus did not come to be the Saviour of only the Jews here on earth, he came to suffer and die, and rise in three days, so that he can be the Saviour of the whole world.

Now at this point I want to ask you the same question – Who do you say Jesus is? This is the important question, isn't it? Its not who others say Jesus is, its not who the public or our parents or our church say Jesus is, its who do YOU say Jesus is. (Pause) Jesus didn't just ask the disciples who do others say I am, he followed it up with the personal question, who do you say I am? And the answer to this question should affect how we live our lives. Just like correctly identifying the spider would lead to action by my friend. If we say that Jesus is the Christ, and understand what that means, that he is the king sent by God, who sent to suffer and die for us it should lead us to follow him.

And here in verses 23- 26 Jesus finishes this passage by telling the disciples what it means to follow him as the Christ.

They need to deny themselves and take up their cross. This may sound a little weird, but it is actually explained right in these verses. To take up the cross means to deny yourself and to follow Jesus. In those days taking up your cross literally meant taking your cross to where you were to be crucified. There was public humiliation as you were forced to publically walk with your cross to your death. So taking up your cross in the context of this verse meant being public with your faith and your following of Jesus and baring with the suffering for what you believe. For the Christians of Jesus time, that could and often did mean death. When the Christians publically declared who they were, they were often killed. Today taking up your cross can obviously mean something a little different. There are of course still countries where publically declaring you are a Christian can lead to physical punishment and death, but here in Sydney it is different.

So what does bearing your cross look like in Sydney in 2009. Over the years I have talked to many people who have said that they are bearing a cross, which was an injury or problem in their lives, I know I have said at times in the past when I have had problems that I am bearing my cross. But this is not what this passage is talking about. This passage is not just saying, put up with injuries or problems you have, its so much more than that. It says deny yourself and take up your cross. When you bore your cross, you did it publically and were often ridiculed. Bearing your cross is about publically showing you follow Christ, its about suffering and putting up with problems because of following Christ. Its about denying yourself and focusing on Christ.

The rest of the passage I think helps to explain this further. If you seek to save your life, to focus on yourself, to focus on what this world offers us and not trust in God and Christ, you will ultimately lose life forever. But on the other hand if you lose your life, by giving it to Christ, denying yourself then you will save your life by living forever with Christ.

Jesus then almost describes the opposite of denying yourself and taking up your cross. He says that whoever is ashamed of me and my words, that Jesus would be ashamed of him. Instead of denying ourselves and opening ourselves up for public humiliation for Jesus, we are ashamed of Jesus and hide or deny him. I think this can definitely apply to us. Are we ashamed of the words of Christ and who he is? Is that stopping us sharing the good news of Jesus with others at work or school. I always thought that I was sharing Christ at work, when I answered the question, what did you do on the weekend with “I went to church on Sunday”. And although this can be useful, I was challenged to go further when a friend of mine who was a new Christian kept telling me stories of how he discussed his faith at work, he would change jobs and tell me again of how he engaged with co-workers about his faith in Christ soon after starting. That is not being ashamed of Christ. So I started reading my bible at lunch and that immediately got peoples attention and I was challenged about what I believe. Maybe that’ is a way you can not be ashamed of the gospel.

Or how about door knocking? Are you ashamed of Christ and his word and is that stopping you door knocking?

I have a confession to make. I have never door knocked, I have been given opportunity to do it a number of times, but I have never done it. Partially I think I am afraid, I know that may sound funny a 6ft 6 man saying he was afraid, in fact you may be thinking, that's what the people on the other side of the door may be thinking when they open it up and see me. I am not afraid physically, but afraid of being rejected. I also think that I may be hypocritical for doing door knocking, after all I don't like it when people knock on my door, so why should I do it to them. Now I had always thought these were reasonable reasons for not door knocking and that there was no way you could say that the reason I was not doing door knocking was because I was ashamed of the gospel. But having looked at this passage this week and having been challenged at college about door knocking, I think I may have to revise this statement.

Because if I really believed in the message that I have, if I wasn't ashamed in it, if I believed God had blessed me with the knowledge of how to be saved, wouldn't I be sharing it. I remember a drama I did while at uni. It involved 2 characters who had just died, they were friends and were talking to each other while waiting to be judged. They were reminiscing about the good times together, the fun they had together and the things they had done. Then an angel comes in and tells one friend that he is going to heaven, and the other that he is going to hell. The friend who is going to hell looks at his other friend and says, why didn't you tell me, why didn't you say something about Christianity. His friend looking ashamed says he always felt uncomfortable, didn't know the right words, was worried that it would affect the friendship. The other friend as he walks off to Hell says, "Do you think any of that matters now?"

This has stuck with me, we need to tell our friends about Christ, we can't be ashamed of the gospel. And its not just our friends. At college this week at a lecture on door knocking. One minister told us his congregation who struggled with door knocking, the church had been at its location for 20 years, and finally they started to do door knocking, it had some success and some of the people door knocked eventually came to Christ. One asked when they met the minister, why had it taken 20 years for someone to knock on their door.

The other thing I find challenging about this section is the word daily. We are to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. Its not just a Sunday thing, its not just a Connect 09 thing, its daily. Everyday of our lives we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross. Every day of our lives we are to publically show that we are Christians. Everyday of our lives we are to lose our lives to Christ.

If we know who Jesus is, that he is more than a prophet, more than a good teacher, that he is the Christ. If we know that he came to die and rose again in three days. Are we ashamed of that? Or are we denying ourselves and publically taking up our cross to follow him.

Amen