

PROPER 19

He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Yesterday I popped in to Waitrose to buy a paper. Immediately I was confronted by what at first glance looked like two potatoes walking around. But when I drew a little closer it appeared – bizarrely – that these were two haggises (haggies? Haggi?). They were moving around among the shoppers – inside, of course, were two men intent on their task of promoting McSween the butcher to the people of Morningside. They were getting interesting reactions. Children looked in wonder – sometimes in rapture, sometimes less sure about all this. Shoppers turned their heads. I spotted one internationally recognised New Testament Scholar (I jest not) chasing after them and asking if he could take their picture on his mobile phone.

The moment was, indeed, surreal.

It took me a second or two, but then I realised that there was a connection here between the walking haggises and the bible passage I had been pondering over in the previous hours. No one would venture to compare Jesus to a walking haggis – but just think about the question of recognition and reaction for a moment.

In a place where it was not to be expected, the people of Morningside encountered something bizarre – and in a few minutes they had to sort out these coded messages in their heads.

Are these potatoes? Yes – no, wait a minute, they are not.

So what are they? They are haggises!

Why are haggises walking round Waitrose? It is not in the essential nature of a haggis to walk anywhere. They have legs – therefore they are probably (given the shape and the size) men. They are capering and drawing attention to themselves. Ergo, they are there to advertise a haggis – and then we see the sign that the haggis is McSween's.

Now our minds make journeys all the time – often at supersonic speed – when we have to sort out situations, read the signs and arrive at conclusions. One of the best known areas where this happens is in the question of identity. Every time we meet a new person we begin laying down a network of facts and feelings that will determine how we will feel about that person for a long time to come.

Jesus pushes straight into that important area on that day as they walk the dusty road to Caesarea Philippi. Paul Tillich in his book "The Shaking of the Foundations" describes this journey as being "on a road between some unimportant villages, at a time which seems indefinite -- then. But on this road occurred the most important event of human history. It is the most important not only from the point of view of the believer, but also from that of the detached observer of world history. And this indefinite "then" pointed to the most definite and decisive moment in the experience of mankind, the moment in which one man dared to say to another: "Thou art the Christ.""¹

But the place is not so insignificant as it may appear. Nor is the time! In Mark's gospel this is the first time that Jesus enters into Roman territory. It is when he approaches the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi that he asks the question.

¹ Paul Tillich: *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948), Charles Scribner's Sons, a sermon collection

PROPER 19

Jesus' identity - or how he is seen - has a particular meaning in relation to the empire. The rest of the gospel turns on this point. Is he the Son of God (*divi filius*, the same appellation used of Emperor Augustus)? Or is he a rebellious slave who must be crushed and obliterated, lest he infect others with his heresy? This is also leading up to the Transfiguration – and, indeed, to the whole passion and death part of the Jesus story.

And on the road, Jesus inquired of His disciples, "Who do people say I am?" "Well Jesus" they said, "some vote for John the Baptist, some even think you are Elijah reappeared as was promised – or at the very least, one of the big prophets. What were they up to? They wanted it to sound as if Jesus was very important – certainly way above any ordinary human being. They had caught a bug, you see. They were only out trudging those roads because they had begun to leave that there were new times coming. After generations of waiting, at long last, in their very time, a new order of justice, peace and integrity in creation would dawn.

This was so exciting for them – and they knew, they knew very well in these apocalyptic times that this sort of thing didn't just happen without a bit of a show being put on. There would be forerunners of this new age – their job would be to announce its arrival and to prepare the people. So Elijah would come from heaven, to which he had been elevated; perhaps Jeremiah would rise from the dead; or some other prophet would appear; even John the Baptist might return from his grave. They felt that behind the figure of this teaching and healing Jesus some mysterious thing was hidden. They thought that He must be the mask for one of the forerunners, who would come to prepare the new and final period of history. On that momentous day, when Jesus said to them – "who do people say that I am?" – they were ready with their answers.

Of course Jesus understands all that. So he pushes on a bit – "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Be very careful. If you are drifting off now into a little day dream stop right there – because you have just heard the most momentous question in your life!

"That is the question which is put before every Christian at every time. It is the question which is put before the Church as a whole, because the Church is built upon the answer to this question, the reply of Peter: "You are the Messiah." Peter did not simply add another, and more lofty, name to the names given by the people. Peter said, "You are the Messiah." In these words he expressed something which was entirely different from what the people had said. He denied that Jesus was a forerunner; he denied that somebody else should be expected. He asserted that the decisive thing of history had appeared, and that the Christ, the bearer of the new, had come in this man Jesus, Who was walking with him along a dusty village road north of Palestine."²

We – the Church are asked to be clear about this teacher and healer. Jesus himself asks us – "Who do YOU say that I am?" When Peter replies he replies for us all. And the message is that we now have a remedy for all our uncertainties, all our deeply held fears.

I'm not offering an easy answer. One of the things that marks out this congregation is its wide open invitation for people to bring their doubts and agnosticism and beat out the

² ibid

PROPER 19

questions that matter to them. Every day we try to rub out the boundaries we keep wanting to draw between congregation and community – and that is the most important thing we do. No one must stop at the door of this church and say – “I can go no further, because they believe something that I can’t!”

Because the truth of the matter is that we know almost nothing. If we see at all, it is “through a glass darkly”. If we assert at all, it is that every person is a child of God who deserves our deepest respect, and our warmest welcome.

But even through our fevered explorations into God and into the meaning of life with God, we can still proclaim an assurance. Indeed we must. It is our job. We are the church!

And here is where it is to be found. It was obvious to Peter. He was starting to really believe that when he dropped his nets, his only way of making a living, left his family and the security of home and had followed Jesus--he had indeed found the Messiah. And as he followed Jesus with the others, he began to see the signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom--the sick being healed, the lepers being cleansed, the crippled walking, a tax collector becoming a disciple, the wind and sea being calm, 5,000 being fed, Jesus walking on water, the blind seeing. So when pressed for who Jesus was, he exclaimed, "You are the Messiah!"

I see – and you see too – the in-breaking of the kingdom. And suddenly the clarity of who this Jesus becomes bright and shining reality. There is a Greek word that is important to New Testament Scholars – yes, even the ones who chase after haggises in Waitrose. It is κήρυγμα. Kerygma is the essential proclamation and preaching of the early Church. It is, if you like, our marching orders. And at its heart? “Jesus is the Messiah!” “Jesus is the Christ!” “Jesus is Lord!”

This is our assurance – and it is the word we are to share. Always, everywhere – and especially among our friends and neighbours – the community God has given us.