

Lesson 28 – Luke 9:18-27
“Identity of Jesus: Confession & Call”

June 14, 2009

Introduction

If you've ever been to Butchart Gardens you will have seen the 'boar scarer' in the area known as the Japanese Gardens. The 'boar scarer' is a noise making device apparently designed to scare away wild boars but which also plays the role of intriguing and getting on the nerves of unsuspecting tourists at the same time. It produces an incessant knocking sound by using a simple bamboo tube sealed at one end and a constant water supply which is directed into the other, open end of the tube. This 'thirsty' tube is mounted at an angle, the sealed end set firmly on a large rock in a pond; the open end pointing upwards at about a 30° angle and placed strategically under the water supply which may be described more as a trickle than a flow of water. Approximately 2/3 of the way up the tube a pivot point is established such that just as the tube fills to the brim with water it becomes top heavy and the open end of tube falls toward the pond unceremoniously dumping the contents of the tube into the pond which immediately reverts the balance of weight to the sealed, now empty, end of tube which in turn crashes down upon the rock producing a bonking noise apparently intolerable to boars but mysteriously attractive to most tourists. A constant trickle of water going into the open end of the tube ensures that this cycle of futility repeats itself every 15 seconds or so...

Many of the writers who examine the writings of the Gospel of Luke suggest to us that the passages we come to today and next week form something of a 'tipping point' in the story that Luke is telling us about Jesus. Most of them use the word fulcrum as these texts are seen as the pivot point for Dr. Luke. In particular this pivot point has everything to do with the all important question of the identity of Jesus.

We have been noticing the 'who is this' questions as they have been coming along:

- Who is this who even forgives sins?
- Who is this who holds authority over demons?
- Who is this who commands the wind and the waves and they obey Him?
- Who is this who teaches with such authority – He is not like the other rabbis!

To this point Luke has not provided answers to these questions. Instead, using all the skill of a masterful storyteller, he has been allowing the suspense to build. Just like the trickle of water nearing the top of the bamboo tube of the 'boar scarer', the suspense is nearing the tipping point. There are about to be 2 clear and highly significant assertions as to the true identity of Jesus - one that Jesus

Himself draws out from the lips of Peter; and the other that comes as a supernatural voice from heaven itself in the event we call the Transfiguration.

I want to draw attention to one further clue that tells us that what is recorded in our text is going to be of great significance. Notice how our passage opens: “*Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him...*” Luke consistently records Jesus spending time in prayer before any significant event. We’ve seen already that He prayed before choosing the disciples. It is well known that Jesus prayed earnestly in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest and crucifixion. The record of Jesus praying at this juncture is yet another indication that what is to unfold is of the utmost importance.

The 4 questions

I am obliged to a fellow by the name of Donald Miller (not the one of ‘Blue Like Jazz’ fame) who wrote a very helpful article¹ on our passage. He has observed 4 questions which I believe form an excellent grid for our examination of the verses before us. The questions are very useful to us because they easily bridge the chasm of time between then and now and allow us not only to gain insight into the events as they unfolded in the first century, but also help us to learn the same lessons for 2009.

- Who do people say Jesus is?
- Who do you say Jesus is?
- Who does Jesus say he is?
- And who does Jesus say you are?

Who do people say Jesus is?

We must pay attention to the ambience here. Jesus is ‘*praying in private and his disciples were with Him*’ (v. 18). The picture here is one of intimacy. Jesus is withdrawing from the crowds and is spending time alone with the 12 who are called ‘apostles / sent ones’. It is very important to capture the sense of intimacy in the text because Jesus is about to say some very hard words to the 12 disciples. A couple of weeks ago we noted that in the flow of the story, Jesus is now focusing His attention very much on the 12 disciples. They are His apprentices and from the beginning of chapter 9 we see Jesus investing much time and energy into preparing them for what was to come. I can’t emphasize enough how important it is for us to try to get into the lives of these 12 people as much as possible – we have much to learn from them. They, as a group, are not particularly bright, they are often a little thick, they

¹ *Miller, Donald* E.. Source: Interpretation, 37 no 1 Ja 1983, p 64-68.

are sometimes very selfish – and yet these are the ones (at least 11 of them) who later on will be highly influential in ‘turning the world upside down’. Why?? Because they will finally get what the kingdom of God is all about and they will offer up their lives in order to see God’s kingdom extended throughout their world.

Jesus here is pressing them – He initiates this conversation about His identity. Notice the word that He uses – ‘who do *the crowds* say I am?’ Who are these ‘crowds’ Jesus refers to?? If you look back up at the previous story about the feeding of the 5,000 people, this word is used to describe the people who were fed. So here’s the picture to imagine in your mind. Pretend you are one of the 12. You’re on bread delivery duty. As you take this bread around to these thousands of people, you hear people talking among themselves in astonishment. ‘Who is this man?’ ‘Who could do something like this?’

And now, some undefined period of time after that event, Jesus is asking you, ‘What did you hear?’ ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’

Their report seems to indicate that most people thought he was John the Baptist come back to life. The fact that they thought this speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the ministry of John. Their 2 voices obviously sounded similar – John called people to repentance; so does Jesus; John spoke much about the kingdom of God and what life is like in God’s kingdom; so does Jesus. Others peg him as Elijah or one of the other great prophets from the Old Testament – particularly those that spoke with great power and authority.

We know Jesus is going somewhere with this question, but we need to stop for a moment and bring this question into our own context. If we are to be effective at bringing the Good News of the kingdom of God into our context, we need to ask (and answer) this question for ourselves – who do people say Jesus is?

Exercise: take 2 minutes to turn to the people around you and talk about what you hear people saying about Jesus in the course of your life? Who do they think He is? Do they like Him or despise Him? What do they think about the stories they hear about Him?

[Gather some responses] If we are to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God to our friends and family, it is absolutely key that we have an understanding of what they think of Jesus.

Our second question becomes more personal...

Who do YOU say Jesus is?

In the way the Greek language is constructed for this phrase, the word YOU is in the strongest place of emphasis. And so we once again imagine ourselves sitting with the disciples in this place of intimacy with Jesus. He's looking right into our eyes – you can feel His eyes looking deep within you; deeply penetrating and yet overwhelmingly gentle and loving. 'Who do YOU say that I am?'

There is no more significant question that can be asked of you. Your response to this question defines who you are as a person. This question inevitably leads. If you receive and fully believe the picture that Luke is painting for us here about the identity of Jesus, then you cannot remain the same person – you will, as we will see in a minute, give up complete control of your life to Him and follow Him completely. If you reject the picture, then you retain control of your life and you carry along following your own desires and aspirations, making the best of whatever situation life may present to you.

All of this is based upon the identity of Jesus and whether or not we choose to receive it.

Jesus here is therefore pressing His dear friends to express verbally what they were beginning to dare to believe.

Not uncharacteristically, it is Peter who opens his mouth first. He says, "You are the Christ of God".

What does this mean?? 'Christ' is a Greek title which literally means 'the Anointed One'. It is equivalent to the Hebrew term that we translate Messiah.

The Old Testament writers consistently pointed toward the day when the Messiah would come. He would be the One who would redeem His people Israel. We can perhaps imagine that these Jewish disciples have already been secretly wondering, hope against hope. 'Could this be the One who was promised by the prophets?' No-one would dare to say it out loud – if it wasn't true it would be the height of blasphemy.

But here Jesus presses them to speak the unspeakable; to dare to express their deepest hope in words. And so Peter responds – ‘you are the Christ of God’.

But what would Peter and the others understand about this? What would their hopes be? We imagine that their hopes would be in the area of political power and freedom. They had witnessed that Jesus had the authority to raise the dead and calm the seas; overthrowing the Roman occupation would be a walk in the park for Him! I can picture someone brash and bold like Peter joining forces with another disciple, Simon the Zealot, and the 2 of them marching into Pilate’s palace warning him that his time was limited because the Anointed Messiah of God was here and would soon overthrow the Roman occupation and establish Himself as the new King of the Jews.

I believe it is for this reason Jesus *‘strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.’*

You see, they got the identity of Jesus right – but they missed the character of His kingdom entirely. They thought the kingdom of God was about gaining power and authority; Jesus has to tell them it is actually about giving up power and authority. They thought the kingdom would be about getting a better place for themselves; Jesus has to tell them that the kingdom is all about giving up oneself in order to find true life.

Our 3rd question addresses the identity of Jesus from His own perspective:

Who does Jesus say he is?

Contrary to all expectation, Jesus says, *“The Son of Man 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 is the message the disciples desperately needed to hear but really did get at all. The Anointed One of God had come to do something far less than they thought in one sense and yet far greater and deeper than they could imagine.

We know as we read ahead in the story that the disciples just didn’t get this at all at this point. It really didn’t sink in until after they met Jesus after His resurrection.

Even though they didn't get it, it is critical to notice that from this point Jesus is teaching them that the nature of the kingdom of God is radically different from what they thought it would be. The King is not here to simply overthrow a powerful human empire, the King was here to suffer and die in order to conquer death and provide a way of life, not just for the Jews, but for all the nations of the world!

Jesus, the King, immediately begins to teach them that being a part of His kingdom would also look radically different than they thought. And so we come to our 4th question.

And who does Jesus say you are?

The following words are surprising and in fact upside down to those who expect the kingdom to be characterized by power and authority. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self.”*

Donald Miller comments in his article: *“To follow after Jesus is to be willing to face alienation, uncertainty, humiliation, persecution, chaos, and perhaps death, for the sake of the new community that he has announced. To follow Christ is to be willing to give up family, occupation, security, safety, and all that we ordinarily hold most dear. The one who follows Christ in this way will know the abundance of life in God's kingdom.”*

All of this may seem very grandiose and unattainable. But there is one word we need to notice in Luke description which seems to bring it down into our day to day life experience. Luke quotes Jesus as saying ‘he must... take up his cross **daily**’.

I like Miller's thoughts again here: *“Luke seems to shift the meaning of Christ's call away from heroic acts and toward a continuing attitude, a daily willingness to take up one's own cross. Luke seems to be writing to the many Christians who want to be faithful to Christ in the context of the Roman Empire. Luke's focus is upon our personal identity, our fundamental intentions, our deepest will. As we are willing to lose our lives day by day for the sake of God's kingdom, we find that life is given to us. Following Christ overcomes the desire to create our own lives on our own terms. To follow Christ is to allow God the creator and redeemer to recreate and renew our lives day by day.”*

C.S. Lewis, in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, draws this word picture for us:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised.

But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.”

Too often I believe we avoid these calls to radical sacrifice because we are afraid of what we will lose. I want to remind us that this call to a life of self-denial and sacrifice is tied directly to this question of the identity of Jesus. If Jesus is an imposter or a fraud, then to give up everything to follow him is sheer lunacy!

If Jesus truly is God come in flesh; if He truly is the Anointed One of God who suffered and died, broke the power over death and is coming again one day to take us to be with Himself, then we would be absolutely foolish NOT to give up everything to follow His ways and live in His kingdom.

My brothers and sisters, we live in a place of much comfort, ease, security and natural beauty. How easy it is for us to be lured into complacency! I believe more than ever we need to hear the words of Jesus as He describes what it means to be a part of His kingdom; to be His follower. Marva Dawn has some challenging questions for us to contemplate: *“Does God reign in how we spend our money and time? Do we live out of power or servanthood? If God is really going to the LORD in our lives, WE can’t be. If Jesus is really King, we cannot be antagonistic princes or princesses trying to usurp the throne².”*

What does it really mean to ‘take up our cross daily’? Once again I find Donald Miller’s insight helpful:

Some have considered involuntary suffering or hardship their "cross to bear." Undoubtedly God's compassion is with all who suffer involuntarily; Christ's healing of many and his suffering on the cross signal that compassion. However, "to take up the cross" is more likely a willing acceptance of whatever hardships and suffering come with service for others.

² Marva Dawn, *To Walk and Not Faint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997) 139-140.

*The symbol of the cross has often been used to support violence toward one's enemy. In those cases the cross is turned into its opposite. The all-powerful Son of man confronts the principalities and powers without attempting to kill or destroy. **To take up the cross is a willingness to confront without any effort to destroy the enemy. It is a call to live powerfully without living violently.** It is a willingness to have our lives transformed daily. A commitment to the way of the cross radically changes human institutions.*

We are not the first to wrestle with these realities. George MacDonald penned this powerful poem back in the latter part of the 19th century.

I said: Let me walk in the field.
 God said: Nay, walk in the town.
 I said: There are no flowers there.
 He said: No flowers, but a crown.
 I said: But the sky is black, there is
 nothing but noise and din.
 But He wept as He sent me back,
 "There is more," He said. "There is sin."
 I said: But the air is thick, and fogs are
 veiling the sun.
 He answered: Yet souls are sick, and
 souls in the dark undone.
 I said: I shall miss the light, and friends
 will miss me, they say.
 He answered me: Choose tonight, if I
 am to miss you, or they.
 I pleaded for time to be given;
 He said: Is it hard to decide?
 It will not seem hard in heaven to have
 followed the steps of your Guide.
 I cast one look at the fields,
 Then set my face to the town;
 He said: My child, do you yield? Will
 you leave the flowers for the crown?
 Then into His hand went mine,
 and into my heart came He;
 And I walk in a light Divine,
 the path I had feared to see.
[George MacDonald.](#)

Let us pray...