

## The Messianic Secret (Mark 8. 27 – end)

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

***“Jesus charged them to tell no one about him”*** Mark 8.30

When is it wise to withhold important information from your friends and neighbours? We all do it, don't we? I am in exactly that position at the moment. We are moving into Stamford soon but the location is not yet known. It's not that I don't want you to know but it would be embarrassing if you all turned up for tea and we had not yet laid the carpet! There will be a time – the right time – to divulge that information and then you can bring as many bottles of champagne as you like!

In our gospel reading today, we catch Jesus being rather secretive and it stands out a mile for we know he is usually very transparent. Peter, the rather oafish member of the apostles, has stumbled upon Jesus' true identity and this alarms Jesus who warns them not to tell anybody.

Jesus must have been surprised and pleased that even Peter could now see that Jesus was particularly blessed by God but if this news got out, they would all be mobbed – and for the wrong reasons. The title *Messiah* (Hebrew) or *Christ* (Greek) means '*anointed one*' and it was an incendiary term at that time in the Middle East. The Jews were growing ever-more nationalistic and the Messiah would be the powerful, all-conquering saviour of the nation to smash their enemies and bring peace and tranquillity to the land. (If the recent political history of America flashes across your mind at this point, you would not be far wrong!). That is not what Jesus had in mind and it is not the way that God operates so it was critical that such a term was kept in check. Furthermore, Jesus was just beginning to realize himself that – at this half-way mark in his ministry – his life would be a downward spiral of deceit, failure, pain and an embarrassing death. How could his disciples live with that?

So this passage from St Mark's Gospel introduces us to the biblical mystery which theologians call 'The Messianic Secret'. Through it, the title 'Messiah' or 'Christ' changes its meaning. No longer do we see The Saviour in terms of power but of humility and we, as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have to undergo that re-calibration ourselves. And it can be painful. We might think for instance that The Church is a counter-weight to The State and we would be right but we also know that the profound words of our archbishop do not cover the same column-inches as any cheap chat from a politician.

Again, and more seriously, we may think that our prayers will be answered instantly and with force from an all-powerful God but the result of our prayers may be very different and difficult to discern.

We too fall victim to The Messianic Secret but we are not alone. The disciples themselves are often getting it wrong. So often in the gospels they are portrayed as stupid and on a completely different planet to their leader. This sharp exchange between Peter and Jesus is

a class example of this. As Jesus quietly explains how his future will unfold, Peter flies into a rage. He can't cope with the idea of Jesus ushering in the Kingdom by suffering.

This blindness of the disciples is an encouragement to us as we try to match our own lives to Jesus' teaching. It is not straightforward and we are left – if we are on message – with the uncomfortable feeling that to get to the truth, to act honourably, generously, is a costly way to proceed. Yet that is what Jesus invites us to do if we are to enjoy some hint of his kingdom values today, here on earth.

So it's dangerous for us to think that we are OK smug Christians. The reality always lies elsewhere.

The biggest part of the budget for any cathedral is the Music Department. I loved to attend Choral Evensong – though I was never allowed to sing, you'll understand – and I have wallowed in it for 16 years. But the reality of growing the Kingdom in the hearts and minds of those around entailed costly hours in front of a boring computer screen or – more immediately - holding the trembling hand of a failing parishioner.

We cannot expect a sleigh ride of glory as Christians. Rather, we will need to toil in the traces of God's handcart, fuelled by occasional vistas until our destination is assured.

Amen.