

## Who is Jesus? Who do you say I am?

*I wonder if you can remember what you thought of Jesus when you first heard about him?*  
Perhaps you had a picture in your mind - from a book or an image from a film. Maybe it was a particular story of Jesus, or maybe it was what a friend or relative told you of Jesus. Maybe it was a phrase from a song.

I was taken along to church by my big sister Clare. Our parents didn't believe in Jesus, but Clare took me to Sunday School in my local church in Bristol and that was my first introduction to Jesus.

I heard stories about Jesus week by week.

There was usually a problem - no food, a big storm, someone was ill - and 'as if by magic' Jesus would fix it all. In the pictures we were shown, Jesus was a picture book figure, a cartoon-like figure.

I grew up watching children's TV in the 1970s. One of my favourites was Mr Benn. [Mr Benn](#) wears a black suit and bowler hat, and every day he visits a fancy-dress shop and chooses a costume with the help of a mysterious shopkeeper who wears a funny hat. He then goes out through a door at the back of the shop, and time travels to the world that goes with his outfit. For example, he wore a caveman costume and through the door was an ancient cave where he had an adventure. He usually gets himself into trouble and then, just at the right moment, 'as if by magic' the shopkeeper from the fancy dress shop appears and whisks Mr Benn back to the safety of the normal world.

I think that's how I saw Jesus. I wasn't sure if he was real or fictional. I knew the stories, I'd seen the pictures, and Jesus fixed things "as if by magic".

I wonder what you thought of Jesus when you first heard about him?

Was that when you were a child?

Or more recently when someone told you about him?

Who would you have said he was then?

For me, as a child, Jesus fixed things.

This year the Sunday talks are mostly about Jesus

Today I've asked about your first impressions

But I'll also be asking "Who do you say Jesus is now?" What do you make of him?

It's the same question that Jesus asked one of the disciples when he said 'Who do you say I am?'

I'd like to read you that story in the Gospel of Mark.

If you don't own a Bible, please take a copy of Mark's gospel as a gift and read more about Jesus.

Mark chapter 8 is about three quarters of the way through the Bible, and there's an index if you get stuck.

This story is about Peter and Jesus.

Peter has been following Jesus for a while, travelling round the area with him, listening and watching.

Jesus **does** some extraordinary things

- He heals people
- He calms a storm
- He raises a girl from the dead
- He feeds thousands of people

Jesus **says** some extraordinary things

- He breaks the Sabbath laws and says that's OK
- He says the scriptures are fulfilled in him
- He tells people their sins are forgiven

That really upsets the establishment. The religious leaders don't like it.

And nor do the Roman rulers of the land.

King Herod has just beheaded Jesus's cousin John the Baptist, and is clearly worried about reports about Jesus.

Everyone is talking about this 'edgy' person Jesus. "Who IS he?"

"Who is he going to be for us?"

So, Mark chapter 8 verse 27

*Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"*

*They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."*

*"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."*

*Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*

Keep your Bible open, because we'll read some more later.

## Messiah - a king set apart to save

People had all sorts of ideas about Jesus, didn't they?

They thought he was like some of the great heroes of Jewish history, like Elijah.

Or maybe the next John the Baptist, a famous guy who just got killed.

And then Jesus asks Peter the more personal question. "Who do you say I am?"

Mark records a one word answer - He thought Jesus was the **Messiah**.

What do you think the word Messiah means?

What is Peter saying here?

The Hebrew word Messiah means "anointed one who saves people"

In those days special people would be sprinkled with oil, anointed, as a way of commissioning them. It set them apart. So a Messiah means a special one, chosen, anointed and set apart to **save** people.

The word Messiah might have different meanings these days. Perhaps you've heard Handel's Messiah. Jesus was the messiah who died on the cross.

But Peter didn't know any of that. So, what did he think Messiah was?

Most Jewish people at that time expected the Messiah to be a King who would be a descendent of King David. They expected him to have military power to overturn the Romans, the hated oppressors. To save them as a political liberator.

The Jews hated the non-Jewish temples in places like Caesarea Philippi where this story takes place. This town was built around a cave dedicated to the pagan god Pan. And a grotto for Hermes. And then Herod built a temple to worship Caesar as a god. Jews hated it. They thought the Messiah, when he came, would overthrow these false gods too.

Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah.

He's probably thinking King. Military leader. Someone who will liberate the Jews from the Romans. Get rid of those awful temples. A saviour from oppression.

He can see that Jesus is powerful and is a leader. Messiah.

But hold on. If they all say in public, Jesus is our liberator, messiah, they'll start a rebellion against the Romans. They will cause a riot.

Perhaps that's why, in the story, Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about him. You might not have expected him to say that.

Jesus knew this was not the time and place for him to be in conflict with the authorities.

## Jesus saves - but not how his followers expected

Let's read again the passage in Mark - and look at the passage that follows and how the conversation went on between Jesus and Peter. Imagine you are Peter, you have just said in front of everyone that you think Jesus is the Messiah, the liberator, come to overthrow the oppressors. What happens next is a little surprising.

*Mark 8 v 29-31*

*Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

*But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."*

One minute Peter gets it right. Jesus is the Messiah. The next minute he clearly gets it wrong. He can't understand what Jesus is saying. It all sounds wrong. He has a quiet word with Jesus, but Jesus has not such a quiet word with him, a very strong rebuke.

Peter thought Jesus would save them, he thought the saving was going to come by force.

Jesus said he was going to suffer, get rejected, die and rise again.

This was not the sort of King Peter was expecting. No wonder he began to challenge Jesus.

Peter only had a partial picture of what the Messiah was.

Think about the picture of Jesus you had when you first heard about him - like my childlike cartoon picture.

It was probably a partial picture. And maybe you see him a bit more clearly now.

There is something else in this part of the Bible and seeing things more clearly. The story immediately before the one we read is where Jesus heals a man who had been born blind. But it doesn't seem to go to plan.

## Not seeing clearly at first

*Mark 8 v 22*

*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"*

*He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."*

*Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."*

I'm a GP and as a doctor I think this passage is helpful for thinking about healing and getting better.

Jesus healed a man who couldn't see but he didn't get better straight away. Jesus prayed some more and he was completely healed. Healing happens in stages sometimes. We need to keep praying. At one level this teaches us about faith and continuing to pray.

But there is another layer of meaning in the passage. This story is a parallel to the next story. In both stories, someone doesn't see clearly at first, then starts to see things a bit more clearly.

The blind man sees nothing, then "men that look like trees walking about", then he sees properly.

Peter sees Jesus as the Messiah, but not totally clearly at first. Then he sees things a bit more clearly.

That happened for me too. I didn't see Jesus clearly as a child. But then I did see a bit more clearly.

As a child I believed in a Jesus who 'popped up in stories' 'as if by magic' and fixed things.

Later, when I was 11 I went away on a Christian holiday in Devon for young people. It was lots of fun and each evening there was a talk.

The first night we heard how God made the world and it was good.

The next night Adam and Eve ruined the world and our sin separated us from God

The next night Jesus died and I understood why.

Then we had the chance to ask Jesus to forgive us and give our lives to him, to accept his forgiveness.

This was all news to me. I didn't realise Jesus had done this for me. My partial picture had just become a lot clearer.

So I prayed and asked Jesus to forgive me and that was a significant moment. I was seeing Jesus more clearly. Jesus was now the one who forgave me.

The week went on and the next night I discovered I had to read the Bible every day. To pray, to tell people about Jesus, to go to church.

By the time I got home I knew all the things I had to do to be a good Christian.

So I read the Bible, prayed and did lots of stuff. I felt I had to. But looking back now I can see that I had missed the point a bit. My picture was clearer but still not quite right.

Many adults have a partial picture of Jesus like mine was.

Muslims respect Jesus as the prophet Isa. He WAS a prophet, that's part of the picture.

Other people see him as a great teacher - the best 'moral compass' that we have - something to live up to. That IS part of the picture.

Some people see him as a fictional superhero figure. He certainly did extraordinary things.

Others reject him - say the stories of Jesus didn't really happen. Their picture of the world doesn't allow for such things to be possible.

In my picture, Jesus was asking me to do lots of stuff - I had to earn his love by doing good things.

What's your picture of Jesus like? Is he the one who gives you lots of rules? Is that the whole picture?

## Jesus as Peter's Lord and God

Peter saw only part of the picture in Caesarea Philippi, even though Jesus tried to explain more.

Over the next year Peter watched his leader suffer and die. He then met Jesus after he was raised from the dead, and saw him ascend into heaven.

It must have been totally confusing. The Messiah was not what he had expected. But his picture got clearer over time.

In Acts chapter 2, it's the day of Pentecost and Peter preaches to several thousand people. He tells them about Jesus being sent by God to do miracles signs and wonders. And then who within God's plan was put to death and raised to life. At the end of his speech in verse 36 Peter summarises who Jesus is, the picture he now has:

*verse 36 'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah'*

So again Peter is claiming that Jesus is messiah - the chosen one, the chosen one who would save people.

But now he is adding a second word - Lord.

The Greek word use here is Kyrios (Ku-ree-os) which means master or boss. When people referred to Jesus as Lord in the gospels they were showing him respect almost like we might call a teacher 'sir'.

The word Kyrios has another meaning in the Greek version of the old testament Kyrios was the word used to translate several names of God like Yahweh.

So by calling Jesus Lord, Kyrios, Peter is saying that Jesus is God. And the people listening would have understood that. The picture of Jesus is now dramatically clearer. He is God.

Aged 14 I had my next step in discovering Jesus.

We had a new type of evening meeting at our church with modern songs and a young leader who did things a bit differently.

One time he played the piano quietly and suggested that we close our eyes and ask Jesus to reveal himself to us. Then simply say Jesus name over and over again under our breath. So I did. We were calling on Jesus.

My eyes were closed, but very clearly, I could see Jesus standing in front of me.

He wasn't far away and he had his arms out. HE was calling ME. It was like an invitation. But I couldn't seem to get to him.

But I was confused - I said to Jesus - I've already come to you - look at all I do, I pray, I read the Bible, I come to church.

And then I realised what Jesus was saying to me. I had to let *him* come to *me*. I had to accept the gift he was giving me.

My relationship with him wasn't about what I did for him, it was about what he had done for me.

And as I let go of all that I was doing, and let him come to me I felt a new sense that Jesus was with me.

In that picture in my mind Jesus came to me and I started to understand the free gift of his grace.

That experience of Jesus completely changed my view of him. I came home stunned. I knew I had had a life-changing encounter with Jesus. He became my Lord that evening in a new way. I knew my relationship with him was based on what he had done for me on the cross, and all I had to do was be humble enough to accept it.

So my partial picture of Jesus changed over the years. And from time to time it happens again, and I suddenly see him more clearly.

Has that happened for you?

How do you see Jesus? Who was he? Who is he? How do you relate to him? What has he done for you?

How much of the picture have you got? Perhaps we'll never see him totally clearly this side of heaven. But perhaps our eyesight can improve.

## Jesus asks - who do you say I am?

Today Jesus is asking each of us "who do you say I am?"

Perhaps you think Jesus has the best teaching there is.

Perhaps you think Jesus might just have fixed a few things back then.

Perhaps you respect Jesus.

Perhaps you've rejected Jesus.

Is Jesus your messiah? – has he saved you?

Has he saved you from the oppression of sin?

Is he your Lord and God - is he boss of your life? Is he God?

If you say, like Peter, that Jesus is your messiah and Lord

It's an act of defiance - in this individualist society where we are used to me being number one it is saying God will be first in your life

It's an act of surrender - saying I am not the one who is in charge here - I'm going to let God rule my life.

It an act of trust - we can trust in him and don't need to be fearful because he is there, he is in control. He is God.

If we say Jesus is Messiah and Lord then all of our life changes.

Perhaps you've known this is true for some time but the words have ceased to have the same meaning. Your lenses have got clouded over and you've forgotten some of the aspects of who Jesus is.

So like the church leader I had as a teenager, when we pray next I invite you to call on the name of Jesus. Over and over again call on the name of Jesus. Call on his name today and he may reveal more of himself to you.

For some of you that may be an experience of his presence this morning. Or during the week as you call on his name.

Or maybe you will explore what that means over this year. Study books about Jesus, learn about the names of Jesus, read the story of Jesus, talk to people who have encountered Jesus.

I believe just as the man who was blind could see more clearly God is going to reveal more about Jesus to each of us as we call on his name.

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