

Who do you say that I am?

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[0:00] Let us pause for a moment of prayer. Yes, Lord, may the words of my own mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

! For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, I know that you've been following a series in the Psalms these last few weeks, and so I thought it would be good to do something from the Gospels as something different today.

What should it be? And I have to say that I didn't know what the theme of the holiday club would be, and I'm almost wishing that I'd chosen something about what connected with water and the Sea of Galilee.

However, it did seem good to choose verses from a passage in Mark's Gospel that is really a key passage there and, of course, a key passage for our own lives.

But let me tell you about Black Diamonds and the Blue Brazil. Is that familiar to anybody? First of all, a novel by Ron Ferguson that was adapted into a stage play and performed recently at the Lyceum here in Edinburgh.

[1:28] It's all about coal and Cowden Bees football club. And if you've been to the play, you'll know that the lead actor comes on stage at the start, looks around at the audience and says to us, who has heard of Cowden Bees?

And most people's hands went up. Who's been to Cowden Bees was our next question. And, yeah, a few hands went up. And then she said, who's been to a football match in Cowden Bees?

And amazingly, the guy who was sitting next to me put his hand up. So I want to ask you, who's heard of Israel and Palestine? Put your hand up if you've heard of Israel and Palestine.

Right, pretty well, everybody. Who has been to Israel and Palestine? Right, a number of folks. Who has been to Caesarea Philippi?

Oh, three people. Oh, that's great. And maybe four in the congregation plus myself. Well, some of these pictures will maybe be a reminder to you in that case.

[2:38] And here's a bit of historical geography, if I may. You can see the first picture. Yes, thank you. Caesarea Philippi was first built by Herod the Great, who was the king at the time of Jesus' birth, of course.

And he built it in honour of the Roman Emperor Augustus, who had appointed him as king in Palestine. And there there was a temple to the Greek god Pan.

And that group of people, you can see, are standing on what would have been the ground floor of the building. And behind them is a big cave known as the Grotto of Pan.

And there was a sacrificial ritual that was practised there. The place was extended by Philip, son of Herod the Great.

And therefore the name became Caesarea Philippi. Anyway, and the next picture shows that there's water there.

[3:41] So there is a watery theme today, after all. And water, of course, is very important. And this is one of the sources, main source of, in fact, the River of Jordan.

And so Philip chose it, it's believed, for the beauty of the place, for its water, its fertility. But it was a place of worship of the Greek god Pan.

But not only of Pan, but the next picture shows us the base of a number of other buildings. And there were temples to several gods at Caesarea Philippi.

Including the next picture, I don't know if you can read it. It's partly in English, partly in Hebrew. The tomb temple of the sacred goats. Now, did you know there was such a thing?

Well, these slides give us an indication, I think, of the background to this passage in Mark's Gospel.

[4:38] So we can just move on, Gordon, to a blank screen. Caesarea Philippi, then, was a place dedicated to Caesar as Lord.

And the worship of Roman gods. And it was to near there that Jesus chose to take his disciples. And to draw out of them the confession, you are the Messiah, the Christ. And that was of huge significance, of course, for the disciples.

And when I reflected a number of years ago after a visit there, it struck me as also being, of course, of huge significance in today's world.

There are many and various claims on our allegiance. Perhaps not the Greek god Pan. Perhaps not sacred goats. But you know what I mean, don't you?

[5:40] And we also know, of course, that there are competing claims for what we call the Holy Land. But here is the place where the uniqueness of Jesus is first fully recognised by the disciples.

You are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One chosen by God, Israel's Saviour, the Saviour of the World. And the passage, therefore, is a pivotal one in Mark's Gospel.

Everything in the story leads up to this point, and the rest of the story leads from it. And the clue to that, one of the clues to that, is that Mark started his Gospel with these words.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And he doesn't use the term Christ or Messiah. One is the Greek word, one is the Hebrew word.

The Christ, the Messiah, he doesn't use the term again until this point. And of course, the Jewish expectation of Messiah was as a liberator from oppression, particularly the Roman Empire.

[6:59] The Messiah would be the one who would bring in the reign of God by military conquest. And isn't it the case that through Christian history, and in today's world, there are those who have tried and are trying to achieve the kingdom of God in this kind of way?

Remember the Crusaders, who thought they could Christianise the Middle East by military conquest? Aren't there global leaders today with messianic delusions?

Hasn't the Cross been appearing at right-wing demonstrations in this country, as their leaders seek to impose a brand of, let's call it, white Christian culture throughout the UK?

But the fatal blow to such attitudes and such beliefs is found in what Jesus went on to say.

After he accepted Peter's confession, and after he swore his followers to silence, because if word got out that he was the Messiah, people would get completely the wrong idea.

[8:12] He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and after three days rise again, and he spoke plainly about this.

And that, folks, was scandalous. Too much for the disciples, and Peter, spokesperson as usual, rebuked Jesus.

This must never happen to you. And in return, he got a tongue lashing. Get behind me, Satan. And as one translation puts it, Jesus went on to say, You have no idea how God works.

Peter and the others had no idea, because God works not through conquest, but through apparent weakness, fullness, and suffering.

He conquers evil by taking it to himself, letting it kill him, drawing its sting, and then conquering it by rising to new life.

[9:21] As, you know, the Apostle Paul put it some decades later, The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

This was shocking to the first disciples, but it is, of course, familiar to us. And yet, it's also shocking when they start to apply it today to our own lives.

Jesus called the crowd to him, along with his disciples, because the way for Jesus is the way for all followers of Jesus then and all followers now.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. And I want just to go over some of the particular elements to this statement.

One of them is attachment to Jesus. Yes, being a Christian isn't, well, it's not so much consent to a set of beliefs, or to a moral code.

[10:30] There is these things. There are doctrines to believe. There is a moral code to live by. But first and foremost, it's attachment to Jesus as a person.

It all flows from that. Jesus says to all of us, follow me. It's basic, but it's always worth repeating.

And another part of what Jesus says, of course, a key part, is self-denial. Followers must deny themselves, take up their cross.

Now, it's believed that Mark wrote his gospel in the early AD 60s, at a time when the Christian community in Rome was suffering persecution under Emperor Nero.

It's believed that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome for them. And they would know exactly what was meant by this horrifying image of a death march, taking up your cross.

[11 : 39] They might literally, like Jesus had to do, carry it to their deaths. And thank God we don't face that sort of experience for our commitment to Jesus.

And I don't know about you, but I honestly don't know how I would react if the choice I had was between deny Jesus and live, or confess my faith and die.

But the point, really, is that we're called to a daily death. A death to our selfishness. A death to our pride. A death to our materialism.

Lust. Loss of temper. Wicked thoughts. Gossip. And I just want us to ask ourselves, what deaths do you and I need to die?

It probably won't be a great drama. We'll not be thrown to lions in Rome, or burned at the stake like some early Bible translators.

[12 : 45] But it might cost us in other ways. And, you know, I confess that one of the things I struggle with is judgmental attitudes towards other people.

particularly, I have to say, other Christians. And I need to die a death to that. And you'll actually be glad to know, those of you who know me, that I don't feel judgmental about you particularly.

But there are plenty other people I do. So self-denial doesn't mean we have to go off to the desert and live a life of asceticism.

It doesn't mean we have to deny ourselves the ordinary pleasures and enjoyments of daily life. But it does mean crucifying our sinful attitudes, words, behaviours.

The centre of gravity in our lives has to shift. We are not in charge. Our Lord Jesus is. And I have to tell you that during yesterday, when I was thinking a little bit about today's service and what I might say, I thought, this is really worrying.

[13 : 59] It sounds awfully negative. But, Jesus promises that we will find our true selves when we do this.

For us, just as for Jesus, death leads to life. We find our true selves in him. Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it, says Jesus.

What good is it to gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul? What can you give in exchange for your soul? It's the language of commerce, profit and loss. And, don't we live in a time when many people are trying to gain the world?

Loads of people seem to be making a career out of being influencers. We have tech bros who are maybe the true influencers in today's world.

We have top executives with hugely inflated salaries. We have global leaders trying to impose their authority within their own countries and internationally.

[15 : 10] And yet, I ask myself how much people like that are losing their souls. but at the same time, let's not throw custard pies at easy targets.

Let's look at our own motives and how much we might want to be top dog in our own personal worlds. And the thing is that in the kingdom of God, the last will be first.

Those who die will rise to life. Those who serve are the ones who will be congratulated. Those who deny themselves are the ones who will find themselves.

And yes, it's all deeply challenging, but this is how it works. Perhaps in today's culture, as in every culture, we're always seeking an answer to the question, who do you think you are?

Well, clearly, it's not just about who our ancestors were, as in the TV programme. It's deeper than that. We've had the new age.

[16 : 19] We now have mindfulness, you know, relax, listen to calming music, opt out for a while, find some me time, and yeah, that's all okay. Nothing wrong with any of that.

For myself, I have to say, I've learned the value of a more reflective approach to prayer.

Mindfulness, if you like, meditation, if you want to call it that.

But I also know this, that I, and I'm sure you, are happiest and most fulfilled when we respond to the call of Jesus to follow him, as described here, to renew our daily attachment to him, to renew our daily commitment to take up the cross and crucify what's unworthy, and in doing so, we find our true selves.

As a phrase in the hymn we'll sing to close the service in a few moments, your bondage is freedom. Amen.

Let's pray. Lord, we do ask that your words, your word, your spirit will indeed touch our hearts and help us to constantly, daily renew our commitment to you.

[17:52] In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. may! may