

Power in a Word
Mark 8:27-38
12 September 2021
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae

Perhaps some of you remember, years ago a commercial by Molson's called "The Rant". In it, an average guy named Joe talks about what it means to be Canadian. He says, "I'm not a lumberjack or a fur trader. I don't live in an igloo or eat blubber or own a dog sled. And I don't know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada, although I'm certain they're really, really nice. I have a prime minister, not a president. I speak English and French, not American. And I pronounce it about, not aboot. I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack. I believe in peacekeeping, not policing. Diversity, not assimilation ..." and on it goes until he declares, "I am Joe, and I am Canadian."

A word holds so much than just the basic definition, doesn't it? To be Canadian holds so much more than just being a citizen of Canada. By definition, at least emotional definition, it also contains a whole set of values and hopes and dreams. Things like inclusion, welcome, safety, equality, opportunity, peace, wide open spaces, big

skies and big cities, healthcare, vaccines, diversity ... at least most of us hope it does. And we've all been thinking a lot about this in the last few weeks, and will, in the weeks to come. As another election draws near, as the last troops have pulled out of Afghanistan and as we respond to the Taliban takeover by preparing to welcome more refugees to this country, as we reflect on the impact of residential schools. We find ourselves reflecting on what it means to be Canadian in the face of global crisis, in the midst of a devastating pandemic, in the midst of the climate crisis, and national shame. And we find ourselves reflecting on what values that we hold dear how we want the world to see us. We find ourselves questioning what feelings and images "Canada" will evoke in people in the years ahead based on how we respond to these enormous struggles that are defining the time in which we live. And we find ourselves reflecting on our own responses, too.

Who do you say that I am?

That is the question that Jesus asked Peter.

Who do you say that I am?

Peter said, "You are the Messiah."

The Messiah.

Now there is a word that is loaded with meaning. Messiah. The saviour of the people, leader, the one everyone has been waiting for, the one to improve conditions here, and beyond. The Messiah.

Jesus knew this was a loaded answer and it is hard to tell how he feels about them making this connection. We are told that he sternly told them not to tell anyone, then told them about what this really meant, what was to come for one who was the messiah, who riled the powers that be, who risked and dared to speak up about a new way of being in the world. He began to help them understand just how loaded this word is, how “messiah” was more than just a word but a way of life, a way of being. That it required things, it demanded things, things that would upset the status quo and the powers that be.

This was not what Peter meant. Not what Peter meant at all. No, Jesus was the messiah, the one they waited for and things would get better without all that messiness. This was about life, not death. He just hadn't thought it all through, what that word really meant, what power it held, and how uttering it, proclaiming it, brought Peter into the meaning too.

‘Any who want to become my followers must take up their cross and follow me,’ Jesus told the crowd. Powerful after speaking about death and struggle, about commitment and action; a reminder that proclaiming Jesus the messiah is as much about us as it is about Jesus.

Think about it for a moment. What does it mean for you to proclaim Jesus as your saviour, as your messiah? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus, to be a disciple? If you believe that Jesus’ message, Jesus’ teachings, Jesus’ life have meaning – were to bring change to our world, and continue to bring change to our world, and to your life personally – then what does it mean to be a part of that? What does it mean to follow Jesus? In your everyday life?

Maybe right now, where you are in your life, it means nothing really. Maybe you never think about it that much. Maybe you come to church – or have been tuning in virtually - because worship is a nice break in your week, you enjoy the music, the sense of community, the hope you feel in the words you hear and the prayers you pray ... or maybe you never think that much about it. But today, you are invited to, today you need to. Because what we do here,

what we should do here, has meaning. And that meaning is as important today as it was in Jesus' time.

Because the times aren't that different really. In Jesus' time Palestine was facing oppression. The people didn't really have a lot of hope. The Roman military was in control of just about everything and so saying that you believed a saviour was here, that there was someone with a vision for change and that there was a new and different and better way to do things, it was radical. It is today too. Because today there are a lot of people without hope. This pandemic has brought us to our knees and continues to leave us with a sense of uncertainty and instability that can be paralysing if you let it. As we watch the election campaigns on the news we are seeing levels of anger and aggression that I don't remember. It can feel like democracy itself is being threatened. The climate crisis is bringing storms with power we have never seen before, 20 years after 9/11 Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban. Again. And at a time when we need to stand together, divisions threaten to bring us down.

Proclaiming that we believe these teachings that tell us to love our neighbour, that we are not alone, that God has a bigger vision for us and will work with us to get there, living from a place of hope

instead of fear and saying that the status quo is not all there is, reaching out with welcome and both demanding and living compassion and respect, it is radical. It is as radical today as it was in Jesus' time. It is radical and it is the only way to really live as a disciple. This life of faith stuff is about so much more than simply saying the words, making a proclamation about Jesus. Words are power, and words like messiah, saviour, disciple, follower, Christian, community, church are very powerful. When we live with them, when we invite them into our life we realize they demand to change us, they demand to impact us and influence our actions in the world. One can not simply proclaim Jesus their messiah, can not claim the identity of Christian and not be changed by it. It demands response - **political response**: prayerful engagement with the candidates and their positions, **personal response**: what actions and responses point to how I believe Jesus is calling us to live and be in relationship with our world and creation, **outreach**: what can I do to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, love my neighbour, and care for creation. Being a person of faith requires response. It is not all about us.

‘Who do you say that I am?’ Jesus asked his friend. The messiah? The minute you make that connection, Jesus asks you, “And who then are you?”

Who are you? Seeker, questioner, disciple, children of God, person of faith, Christian, lost, found, saint, sinner, who are you?

And who do you want to be?

I am Jessica, and I am a Christian. And that means something to me. Among other things it means these teachings will influence my decisions and my interactions with others. It means I try to live from a place of hope, even when I’m not feeling very hopeful, trusting in promises of new life and resurrection. I will do my best to honour God by welcoming those seen by my society as “the other” and welcome the opportunities God brings into my life to do that. It means I will care for creation as best I can, listen to the scientists and experts whose God given brains and talents have enabled them to discover and learn and teach us how to care for each other and this planet. It means I will speak up in the face of injustice and use the gifts God has given me to reflect the light of Christ into this world however I am able.

What does it mean to you?

As this new fall season unfolds I hope you will explore that question in your mind and in your heart. That you will listen to ways God is calling you to live into your identity as a person of faith, whether you've been sitting in a church pew all your life, or if you still consider yourself a seeker, and haven't quite figured out where you fit into this life of faith. And I hope you will open yourself to find ways to live into this calling as a person of faith in new and important ways in our constantly changing world today.

If Jesus is our messiah, who then, are we, as people who follow? Amen.