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'Who Do You Say That I Am? (Luke 9.18-20)

Emmanuel Series I

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The interchange we have just heard between Jesus and his disciples constitutes a pivotal moment, a turning point in all three synoptic gospels. Immediately after it and for the first time, Jesus tells his friends that he must undergo great suffering and be put to death, and on the third day rise again. And immediately after that, in all three accounts, comes the story of the Transfiguration and the beginning of the journey towards Calvary and Jerusalem. It is a moment of truth – after it, the story takes on a new momentum.

Tonight, we are beginning a series reflecting on the meaning of Christ. And I wanted to open this series by attending to this pivotal moment – this moment when Jesus asks his disciples what *they* think his meaning his – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ I want to explore the ways in which this very question opens up for them and for us a new way of knowing him.

There’s a persistent vein in our Christian cultural heritage that is suspicious of any hint of self-concern. Many of us grew up with the sense that spending too much time exploring ourselves and reflecting on our being in the world was to be self-obsessed, navel gazing, self-ish. The thing to do is simply to get on with it – where ‘it’ meant being helpful to other people, or earning a living, or running a household, a parish, a company or country. Instead of focusing inwardly, we were enjoined to ‘forget about yourself’, get over yourself, and make a difference to the world ‘out there’. That’s what ‘leaving yourself behind’ is all about.

In this kind of scheme, Jesus' questions can strike us as a little self-indulgent. 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' 'Who do you say that I am?' If one of us asked it, we might be inclined to say – why worry what they say? And stop looking for validation. Come on, get on with it – plenty more healing to do, plenty more demons to cast out and crowds to feed. Because it's Jesus asking the question, we're a bit more polite than that – but implicitly I suspect we think that the real value of his question lies in the answer it provokes from Peter. 'You are the Messiah of God'. In other words, the point of this piece of Scripture lies not in the question, but the answer. Now that we've got the answer, it's not a question that need concern us particularly. Or is it?

The problem with our cultural inhibitions about contemplating the self is that the spiritual traditions of the world agree that there is in fact an indissoluble relationship between knowing myself and knowing God, between self-understanding and radical transformation. To bypass the self as we've been taught to do more often leads to self-suppression than authentic self-forgetfulness – which means that somehow (even if covertly) we remain firmly at the centre of things and blocking the way to God. St Augustine taught that: 'A person must first be restored to himself, that making of himself as it were a stepping stone, he may rise thence to God'.¹ And Laurence Freeman suggests that Jesus' question about himself, 'Who do you say that I am?', is actually designed to lead *us* more deeply to self-knowledge. 'His question bears a primal power to awaken the dormant, unrealised part of us and to guide it towards the knowledge of the Self'.² And if that is so – then his very asking of the question suggests something of Christ's meaning for us.

Let's start by attending freshly to the passage we have read from Luke's gospel. 'Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them,

¹ Augustine, *Retractiones* I (viii) 3 (Migne PLXXXII), cited in Laurence Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p.56.

² Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.43.

“Who do the crowds say that I am?” Jesus’ questioning rises out of his prayer, his absolute openness to God, his ‘vast [and non-anxious] solitude’.³ Well, who do the crowds say *I* am? Who do the crowds say *you* are? Of me, maybe they say, you are an Australian, a woman, a priest, a daughter, a lover, a teacher – some say you are a good person, others you are a bad person, you have disappointed and failed, or you are making your way, you are successful Who do they say that I am? Maybe take a moment to ask for yourself – who do they say you are?

When we ponder this question, we realise that who ‘they’ say I am never completely expresses ‘who I am’. Even when *I* say who I am at the level of roles and qualities, I never completely express my Self. ‘I am not my moods and thoughts, my beliefs or my social roles and status’, writes Freeman. ‘I may say I am victim, ruler, lover, judge, hunter, artist, priest, father, mother, child, clown or trickster – there are many archetypal roles and combinations. But they don’t answer the important question. Until knowledge of the Self has dawned their impermanence will always lead me back to the same question *Who am I?*’.⁴ Who am I, beyond my roles, my achievements, my failures, my story. Who is the ‘I’, the consciousness, who stands back and observes the ‘me’ whose identity can be described by all those things?

Who do the crowds say that I am?, asks Jesus. The disciples answered: ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen’. He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ With this, Jesus invites his disciples beyond opinion and projection into profound mutual vulnerability. He himself is vulnerable, undefended. When I ask someone I love, ‘Who do you say that I am?’, I am asking ‘do you see me? Do you recognise me? Do you know me?’ In this moment of profound vulnerability, how great the risk of being misunderstood, not ‘gotten’, not seen; how deep the hurt, when those to whom we have given or opened ourselves fail

³ Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.34.

⁴ Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.42.

or refuse to see who we are beyond the roles we are given, beyond their expectations of us or projections upon us.

Yet in his vulnerability, Jesus draws those he questions into vulnerability as well – for how I see you, whether or not I allow myself to know you, recognise you, says as much about me as it does about you. Truly to see another is to be radically open to them, to love them beyond what I want from them, beyond my assumptions and opinions, beyond what I think they should be or do. To be drawn into responding to the utterly open, honest, vulnerable question of Jesus – ‘Who do you say that I am?’, invites the disciples, invites us, into our own journey of self-discovery and self-knowing. This is because to be asked, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ requires me to show up – I can’t hide behind what the crowds say, general opinion. I must answer for myself. And how I answer may begin to reveal me to myself – do I find myself responding to you out of envy or with flattery? Fear? Judgement or anger? Am I relating to you through some expectation in my head? And if so, then who is this who is envious, flattering, frightened, judgemental, angry or disappointed? What is going on for me that I see you, relate to you, in this way?

The more I become present to my reactions and filters, then the more deeply I begin to see you, as yourself, separate from me, more than your roles and your relationship to me. Perhaps I then begin to experience my own Selfhood beyond my roles and relationship to you, and become aware that we share a common life, a common humanity. From the depths and truthfulness and humility of his self-knowledge, Jesus asks his disciples ‘Who do you say that I am?’ And that very question, invites them deeper into their own self-knowing, and deeper into communion with him.

So let me draw out some of the implications of this. To say that an essential question in the spiritual life is ‘Who am I?’, is not to recommend a life of narcissistic self-absorption or self-expression. The self-knowledge aimed at here is not about

maintaining my 'ego' self, the self I present to others and the self-consciousness that keeps me separate from you, trapped inside my own self-image, anxieties and judgements. Instead, it is about becoming aware of, present to the consciousness I am beyond all of that. Thomas Merton speaks of the 'true Self' rather than the 'false Self' or ego. Paradoxically, often enough our way to true self-knowledge is a way of gradually noticing and then letting go of our false self-images and identities, all I 'think' I am or need to be. Writes Freeman: 'What is left when I have let go everything that I am not *is* who I truly am. It is who I have been all along but without recognising it'.⁵ This is a journey towards simple or naked awareness, consciousness as such – which can feel at times like death, so invested are we in the identities we have made for ourselves. And yet it is precisely in this self-emptying, this poverty of spirit, that we come truly home to ourselves, and that the duality between self and God, self and other, dissolves. We discover for ourselves that 'the kingdom of God is within you'.

From this place of transforming union, the mystics of the Christian tradition speak. St John of the Cross said that he knew that God was the centre of his soul. And listen again to St Augustine: 'A person must first be restored to himself, that making of himself as it were a stepping stone, he may rise thence to God'. Christian life is a journey of transforming union – and Jesus is one who invites us into that journey. His question – 'who do you say that I am?' – invites us to show up and to let go of all that is false in us. Through this question his meaning, his self-gift to us as healer, reconciler, diviniser, is discovered, unfolded, as we allow ourselves to be drawn by his question into the deep centre of our own essential silence and emptiness, where we realise our union with God. From his own oneness with the Father, Jesus invites us into union with his consciousness, with the basic energy of the universe that is love.⁶

⁵ Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.46.

⁶ Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.2.

In coming weeks, we will explore the ways this meaning of Christ, healer, reconciler, diviniser, has been expressed in our tradition – as part of our own continuing journey of transformation, and our reception of the gift we have been given.