BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

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Saying Who He Is: Opinion and Truth (Matthew 16. 13-20)

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A couple of years ago I was rung up by a telephone survey asking my opinion about the health service in the ACT. What did I think of it? What did I think of the hospital system? I replied that I had no knowledge of it, no personal experience – I hadn't been to hospital recently. The person with the survey persisted – but what was my 'opinion' of it, what was my impression. I said – I don't have one, I have no basis for an opinion. And then I said: and what's more, I don't want public policy made, or political energy expended, in responding to my (or anyone else's) uninformed impressions. The survey person seemed a bit flummoxed.

'Opinions' are powerful things in our culture. People like to think they have a 'right' to their opinions and are happy to express them, whether they're well-founded or not. Governments want to know our opinions and often act in response to them. Opinion polls drive election campaigns and policy agendas while whole industries create public opinion to legitimate certain courses of action or non-action. And it's not only in politics. Critical journalism is increasingly displaced by uninformed comment in the blogosphere – in what may be called the 'pooling of ignorance'. And on a whole range of internet sites and chat rooms, people seem willing to express, anonymously, incredibly vitriolic and damaging opinions of others, with no sense of accountability for their words and their effect.

What troubles me about all this is that the question of truth and the responsibility for truthful speech starts to get lost. We increasingly speak, act or are governed in response to unreality, in response to opinions formed on the basis of image, perception, gossip, spin. In this world, inconvenient truths (to do, for

example, with climate change) can be debated as if they were simply one opinion among many, and everyone free to adopt their own view. Inconvenient truth-tellers can easily have their funding cut, as has recently happened at the CSIRO.

My hunch, and this might sound a bit surprising, is that this cultural malaise is at least in part a spiritual issue, calling for theological engagement … so let me try to suggest how this is so.

'Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"'

The context of this dialogue in Matthew's gospel is clearly political. Jesus and his disciples have come north of Galilee into the district of Caesarea-Philippi, the city named after Augustus Caesar and his Jewish puppet king, the Tetrarch Philip. It's a regional headquarters of the Roman Empire and here Jesus initiates a significant conversation about the kingdom of God. We tend to hear Peter's confession of Jesus as 'Messiah' and 'Son of the living God' in exclusively theological terms, but Brian McLaren suggests that it was also deeply political. Inscriptions from the first century used titles for the Roman Caesar like 'Lord,' 'Son of God,' and 'Saviour', so here in the vicinity of an imperial city Peter is explicitly recognising the authority of Jesus over the authority of Caesar. Which is, of course, why he gets confused so quickly by Jesus saying that he must undergo great suffering and be killed.

But it's Jesus' questions, and how he asks them, that I want to focus on today. He begins with the generic. 'Who do people (in general) say that the Son of Man is?' And then comes the particular, the personal, piercing through the generalities … 'But who do ***you*** say that ***I*** am?' What I love about this, what's so powerful, is that responding to Jesus is not about abstractions or safely distanced pieties. It's personal and self-implicating. You can't delegate your answer, you can't just hide behind some

collective view. ***You***, says Jesus – who do you say that I am? You must speak for yourself. But what does 'speaking for yourself' mean? I want to suggest it's more than just expressing an opinion, and that Jesus' question helps us see how.

First – 'you'. Who do *you* say that I am? Sometimes it takes a journey of years for there to be a 'you', a 'me', capable of serious response to a question like this – a response that is not just the repetition of received doctrine. Sometimes we need a question like this to confront us with our selves in a new way. Poet May Sarton writes:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces …

Many of us spend a long time wearing 'other people's faces', trying to be and respond as someone else – maybe living up to the expectations of parents or a spouse or religious ideology, maybe rejecting some part of ourselves. But true speech and conversation requires that we speak in our own voice – and that's because they require answerability, the willingness to stand for what we say, the possibility of someone saying to us, 'for goodness' sake, think what you are saying' Or 'surely you don't mean that'? And this requires, as philosopher Raimond Gaita has said, that 'we be present in what we say and to those to whom we speak – present as someone who is living their life and no one else's'.[1]

Second – 'I'. Who do you say that *I* am? Jesus faces the disciples here as 'other' to them. He demands they attend to him not as some projection of their selves, their hopes and fears, but as himself. It's amazing how much of our time is spent in relationship not with the reality of other people, situations and things, but with our ideas about them. Sometimes it's a shock when your partner or your child

[1] Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, second revised ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 278.

or the world demands that you pay real attention to them – look at me, listen to me; in such moments, we glimpse how often we relate on a kind of autopilot – thinking we know already who someone is and what they are about.

When Jesus' asks his disciples 'who do you say that I am?' he is inviting them to be responsible for themselves and their words; *and* he is inviting them to attend to, to be struck by a reality other than themselves and their pre-existing ideas. It is the kind of open, honest question that, as Benedictine teacher Laurence Freeman has said, 'brings us to self-knowledge and self-knowledge changes us. We can answer such a question only when *we* have been simplified by long and deep listening'. By contrast, the expression of opinion in our culture is often disconnected from any responsibility for ourselves and our words – the anonymity of surveys, the 'herd' mentality of gossip and chat rooms – and from any requirement that we be someone truthfully and respectfully related to the subject matter, someone with 'something to say'.

And this is where theological engagement with our opinionated world comes in. Because faith is a practice of learning to be real and to respond to reality. It's about letting go the safety of a second-hand kind of life, protected from the vulnerability and risk of becoming ourselves. It means becoming more fully attuned to and responsive to what is not us – other people, the natural world, God. Faith calls for listening and humility. It begins in unknowing – in letting go our ideas and opinions, even about God. It refuses to settle for easy answers, half-truths and the illusion of control, learning to wait – letting reality reveal itself to us as we grow in our capacity to attend and receive. 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'.

The testimony of Christian faith is that the reality revealed to our patient and humble attention is of a different order than the violent, self-reinforcing order of this world. In Jesus, this reality shared our life to set us free from the need to falsify and control, from the need to make objects of each other to protect or empower

ourselves. This isn't something we just decide to believe – it's something we must come to know for ourselves. As we do, we are changed.

Our opinions – and those washing through our media, and driving our political discourse and institutional life – are often partial, violent, judgemental, impatient.

Truth is a more spacious place – non-threatened, wondering, open, productive of life.

Love of truth might cost us much, as it did Jesus, but ultimately it is what we are made for and it is a gift faith bids us bring our world.