



## **Agency Mass and Commissioning Homily**

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth  
22 September 2016

Sometimes, when the priest or bishop celebrating Mass looks at the readings of the day, he is very tempted to substitute the readings for different ones. I must confess, I was tempted to do this myself as the readings for today are not the easiest ones to preach on. However, as it is the Church which offers us these readings, and it is the Church's liturgy we want to celebrate, it is often better to sit with the readings for a while and allow their message, even if it is a little obscure, to begin to emerge.

The passage from this morning's Gospel is a strange one which seems to have been almost dropped into the text by mistake. In chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, from which today's Gospel reading comes, the emphasis is really on the mission of the disciples as representatives of Jesus sent by him, on the suffering which lies in the future for Jesus, and on the revelation of the deepest truth about who Jesus really is. It is the chapter which, among other things, has the story of the miraculous multiplication of the five loaves and the two fish to feed the five thousand, St Luke's version of the famous story of Jesus asking his disciples what people were saying about him, Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death, and the mysterious account of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain.

It is in the middle of these amazing accounts that the story about Herod's curiosity about Jesus appears. Some people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead and Herod, who had beheaded John the Baptist, was at the same time both fascinated and afraid. Herod's confusion about who Jesus really was actually does point us to the central theme of this chapter of Luke's gospel: it is the question Jesus asks the disciples: *Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?*

The second question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" is the one Jesus puts to each of us this morning. It is a question for every Christian, of course, but for all of us, who in one way or another are the face of the Church for the people who encounter us in our day to day work, it is particularly urgent. It is this question which I would like to reflect upon for a few moments and encourage you to continue to reflect on in the days and weeks to come. Today Jesus is asking each of you, personally, "*Who do you say I am?*" The answer you give really matters.



The little story about Herod in today's gospel reminds us of course that we can get the answer to this question quite wrong. In thinking that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life, Herod had missed completely the truth about Jesus. Certainly Jesus and John had much in common but remember that it was John himself who said that he was not even worthy to untie the strap of Jesus' sandals and that he, John, had to grow smaller so that Jesus could grow greater. People thought all sorts of things about Jesus. Some were completely off the mark as were, for example, those people who thought the devil was working through Jesus. Others were a little closer to the truth in thinking that Jesus was one of the great prophets of their Jewish history come back to life. At least they realised that Jesus was a man of God. Only Simon Peter had the right answer: *You are the Christ the Son of God*. And yet even Simon Peter was horrified by the thought that precisely as the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus would have to suffer and die.

From then until now people have been trying to shape Jesus into what they want him to be. But Jesus was not really asking, "*Who am I for you?*" He was simply inviting people to discover the true answer to the question "*Who am I?*"

The answer of course is that Jesus, the true Jesus, is the one whom we encounter first and foremost in the pages of the gospels, as they are read and understood within the community of faith which we call the Church. It is not our job to construct a personal Jesus who meets our needs: rather it is our task, and our privilege, to engage in the adventure of discovering him as he really is.

In the Church, our community of faith, we are being encouraged in this Year of Mercy to allow the description of Jesus given to us by Pope Francis to guide this journey of discovery. "Jesus," the Pope tells us, "is the face of the Father's mercy". While this does not exhaust the depths of the mystery of Jesus it does point us to something fundamental because, as Pope Francis has also said, "the name of God is mercy". If all of us, in our own ways as people engaged in the life and mission of the Church, are the face of the Church to those we encounter, then our vocation, and our goal, must be that every encounter people have with us is an encounter with the mercy of Jesus.

I have often suggested, especially to young people, that another way of speaking about mercy is to speak of "large-heartedness". I think we all know what large-heartedness looks like in practice and what it feels like to act in a large-hearted way. It is also true that we know what the opposite of large-heartedness looks like and what it feels like when we fail to treat people in a large-hearted way. And perhaps even more importantly we know what it feels like when we are treated in a mean-spirited rather than in a large-hearted way.

One answer we can confidently give to the Lord as he asks us, "*Who do you say I am?*" is to respond, "*Lord you are the one who always treats others with the large-heartedness of God*". In



giving such an answer we also answer the question, *“What does it mean to work in an agency of the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth?”*