

Mark's Gospel - 1/17/10 – Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8:22-36 – What's Your Image?

Take a look at these pictures that represent four images of Jesus: Jesus the good shepherd who tenderly cares for his sheep; Jesus enjoying holy hilarity as he celebrates life; Jesus with the little children; Jesus in a traditional portrait. With which one do you most closely identify or is there another that is your favorite? Is there a right one or do they depict various facets of Jesus' character? What's your image of Jesus? We each have one, and so did each of the four gospel writers. While writing with specific audiences in mind, each gospel writer developed one particular aspect of Jesus' character. For Mark, it was the strong Son of God.

Today's gospel reading is a keystone text in Mark. At the midpoint of his ministry Jesus huddles with his disciples. They've heard Jesus teach; they've witnessed his miracles; they've walked closely with him for two or more years. What is their perception? What have his words and actions communicated about his identity? Who am I to you? What do others say about me? More specifically, who do you say that I am? What does our relationship with Jesus tell us about his character and God's way in the world?

Like the pictures we just saw of Jesus, there were differing images of the Messiah. Some envisioned that the Messiah would be a superhero like King David, swooping in with awesome power, flexing military might, overpowering the occupying Roman army, cleaning up injustice, and bringing in an age of prosperity. Power, prosperity, and a popular following are the marks of earthly kings and kingdoms. No wonder Caesar thought he was a god and, in fact, had his image inscribed on a coin along with the title of Savior and Lord. Peter was hoping that Jesus, with Peter at his side, would have power, wealth and fame and turn out to be the one on top. Martin Luther called this way of God a theology of glory. It typifies the way of the world. God wants us to be popular; God wants us to be rich, come in first, be winners, and enjoy the good life.

As Mark tells it, this is not the image Jesus had of the Messiah. Jesus reveals that God often works through weakness, even shame and death. Luther called this the theology of the cross. As followers of Christ, taking up a cross is not simply about putting up with bad things and toughing it out. It's about serving others, perhaps even dying for others. It's about faithfully walking in the way of God's love, a love that enters physically, emotionally and spiritually into the situation of another person, identifies with that person, joins that person, and becomes a tangible expression of God's presence, power and healing. Jesus reveals that the heart of God is a heart of compassion. Compassion is heartfelt love in action. This is how strength is perceived and revealed.

In the movie *Invictus*, in which Morgan Freeman stars in the role of Nelson Mandela, there is a moving scene as he takes office as President of South Africa. The country is in turmoil as the Afrikaners are ousted from office after years of apartheid. Fear grips the white Afrikaners as they anticipate revenge for years of oppression. Many doubt that blacks can run the country. In the opening days of his administration, positions within the government had to be filled quickly. Whites thought they were on the way out, blacks on the way in. The scene has 4 white former secret service officers from the previous administration reporting for duty. They walk into the security office now occupied by 4 black men. Each looks at the other with skepticism and resentment. "Who's in charge?" a white man asks. "I am," a black man replies. "What do you want?" "We were told to report to this office." Eyes are now big as saucers; rage seethes. The white man hands the black man a letter from the President. The black man takes the letter, looks at it, and then storms out of his office into Mandela's office. "What's the problem?" Mandela asks. "Did you sign this letter?" Mandela looks at it and indicates that he did. "How could you do this? They abused us for years; they beat us up, put us in prison, and killed our people. How can we trust them? How can we work with them?" Mandela looks at the man and says, "If we treat them the same way they treated us, then nothing has changed. We're here to create a new South Africa, and that new South Africa includes everyone."

Jesus came to change the world, to change the way we live together and treat each other. The kingdom of God does not replicate the kingdom of the world. The kingdom of God is about a new way of living where everyone is included. Mandela, like Jesus, shows us a different way of being together in the world. Throughout the movie, we see how this new way begins to affect and change the lives of others. For me, this is the image of the strong Son of God that we see in Mark's Jesus – strength that comes in humility; strength that resists using

power to coerce, exploit and oppress; strength that identifies with the hurting, hungry and hopeless and seeks to enter into that suffering in order to bring healing, hope and help. This is the strong Son of God we see in Mark's Jesus. It is the way of cross, the way of the Christ. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Indeed, the paradox of the faith is that by giving our lives away in self-giving love, we find the true meaning and abundance of life.