Christ and Identity
Mark 8:22-9:1

When I left home for university my mother replaced me with a dog. A dog called Sammy. What my mother had not anticipated is that this would cause her to go through an identity crisis. Because afterwards, she described how her identity had changed through her life. She started off as Tommy's, my grandfather's, daughter. Then she was George's, my father's, wife. Then, she was Martin's mother. But now, she was reduced to being Sammy's owner. She would take the dog for a walk, meet someone and they'd go, 'Oh! So *you're* Sammy's owner! Dave… come and meet Sammy's owner!' Being defined by your dog is not exactly flattering, is it?

But in our current cultural moment identity is a huge issue, isn't it? Tribes have formed based on sexual identity, or on an identity as a victim of oppression, of one form or another. The use of pronouns - who I say you are, and so-called mis-gendering, or dead-naming, or who can go into what bathroom or play what sport based on who *they* say they are, are all hot-button issues. And as a result our politics are marked by *identity* politics. As each group seeks to have its narrative be the prevailing one.

All of which raises a huge question - who are you? And who gets to decide? Do your feelings, or sexual desires determine your identity? Or does what you do, or have, define who you are? Or, is your identity something shaped from outside you? And how should identity influence how you live?

Well, today's passage is all about identity. First Jesus' and then yours.

The Question of Identity
And Mark has been building up to this moment when, in v29, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" It's not an exaggeration to say it's probably the question of our age.

And in getting us there, Mark's been providing evidence to help us come to a conclusion - evidence like Jesus's authority over demons, and nature, and sickness, and the sabbath. But before presenting us with Jesus' question, Mark shows us one more miracle. Except this one is odd.

Verses 22-23, 'Some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spat on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?"'

Now, have you ever had a bad day at the office and you're just not quite firing, you're just a bit off your game? Well, is that Jesus here? Because the man says, yes, I can see, but not clearly - I can make out people but they're kind of blurred, like trees walking.

So is this Jesus, able to heal, but the power's not quite flowing, he's not quite firing at his best, so he has to 'take two'? And v25, 'Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly.'

Is that what's going on here? Like the old adage, if at first you don't succeed… what do you do? You try, try and try again. So Jesus tries again.

But if that's the case, why would Mark present this to us right before Jesus pushes the disciples to a decision about who he is? Why present a weakness, an inability to heal first go, right at the end?

Well, the answer is, because that's not what this is. Firstly, throughout this healing, does Jesus ever appear flustered? Does he say anything like, there must be some blockage here; man, you need to have more faith, you need to pray harder? No. In fact, he seems in total control. The one thing he does is something he never does elsewhere. He interrupts the healing with a question. Verse 23, "Do you see anything?"

Does that sound familiar? Why ask that? Well, look back at what's happened right before this healing. In v17-21, Jesus has just peppered the disciples with questions. One of which, v18, is "Having eyes do you not see?" In fact, you could summarise the 8 questions Jesus asks them with this one question he asks the blind man: do you see anything?

As you look back on all the miracles, as you review all the teaching, as you observe Jesus' character - do you see anything?

Take this blind man at stage one of the miracle - can he see? Yes… but. And the disciples, can they see? Yes… but. And the same can be true for us. Maybe you're investigating Christianity, or coming back to it, and like the blind man, and like the disciples, you're beginning to see. But it's still a bit blurry.

And to determine what they see, Jesus asks them. But first, he asks who other people think he is: v27, "Who do people say that I am?" Now, apparently, your average politician is obsessed with opinion polls and approval ratings - how am I doing? What are people saying about me? But that's not what Jesus is doing here. In fact, it's the opposite. You see, think what he did with the blind man, v23, 'He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village.' And Jesus is doing the same with the disciples, everyone else - 'the village' - has their opinion of who Jesus is, but he wants them to come to a decision for themselves.

So, what is everyone else saying? Verse 28, 'And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." All of which, for a travelling rabbi, with no formal education, are huge compliments. And yet, they don't go far enough.

But what's interesting is that in our post-Christian culture, people - can have surprisingly similar views, if they have a view at all, if they think he existed at all. They may see Jesus as one of *the* great religious figures, an enlightened teacher up there with Buddha, or a great mystic. Or, they may see him as a social revolutionary, whose program was sadly hijacked by Paul and the church.

But while what other people think about Jesus matters, what Jesus is doing here is telling them that when it comes to him, you can't submit a proxy vote - someone can't decide for you. You can't just go along with the crowd. Instead, Jesus makes this personal. It's not what the crowds think, it's not what the village of your friends or family or Twitter or Tik Tok think. Jesus takes them, and you and me, by the hand, aside from the village, and asks v29, "But who do you say that I am?" The responsibility to come to a decision as to his identity rest on each of us personally.

And Peter's the one who answers. Verse 29, "You are the Christ." You're the messiah. You're the One all the Law and the Prophets and the history of Israel has been promising would come. You're the final, ultimate king in the line of David. That's who you are.

Peter sees! Except he sees partially, it's blurred, because he has all these expectations of how he thinks the Messiah is going to behave. And what Jesus makes clear is, he's not *that kind* of Messiah.

And it's only by *really* understanding Jesus' identity that Peter and you and I can understand why Jesus will do what he'll do. *And,* it's in knowing his identity that we can find our own.

What Flows from Identity

So, up until now, Mark's gospel has been building to this identification of Jesus as the Messiah, but from now it takes a turn. Verse 31, 'And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected… and be killed, and after three days rise again.'

Now most years, we do a Christmas play. And the funniest bits are typically those where I'm sat there going - 'er, that is not in the script!'

Well that's what Peter's thinking. 'Er Jesus, that is not in the script'. Except Peter's not laughing, he's serious. And if in v31 Mark tells us Jesus 'began to teach them' that he must suffer, in v32, Peter takes Jesus aside and 'began to rebuke him'. Because, along with every other Jewish person at the time, Peter has no space for a suffering messiah. Suffering, rejection and death aren't in the script. But a Messiah who defeats their physical, flesh and blood enemies, like the Romans, and gathers God's people and ushers in a new, glorious era of righteousness and geo-political power, is.

And not for the first, or last time, Peter's just like us, isn't he? I mean, have you ever found yourself wanting to tell God how the script of your life, or of others' lives, should go, and wanting to take him aside and correct him? You see, Peter thinks he understands better than Jesus what Jesus needs to do and how he needs to do it; that suffering plays no part in God's plan for his life.

But look how Jesus responds, v33, 'He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" And Peter goes from being top of the class, giving the right answer, to being expelled from school, all in the space of a few minutes. But why does Jesus respond so strongly?

Because he sees where this is coming from and where it's leading to. You see, at his baptism, God the Father speaks over Jesus and says, "You are my beloved Son." (Mark 1:11). It's a declaration of his identity. But what follows is Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness to question that identity: 'if you really are the Son of God…'

And here, Peter makes another declaration of Jesus' identity, 'You're the Messiah' - but what follows is Peter unwittingly tempting Jesus to avoid the implications of that identity.

And so Jesus says to him, v33, "You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." In other words, 'Peter, you've got the job title right, but the job description wrong.' And 'the things of man' are to think the way the world thinks - that our greatest enemies are flesh and blood ones, and they're to be crushed by political power. But 'the things of God' are to understand that our *real* enemies are not going to be defeated by physical power but through the weakness of the cross.

It's why Jesus says, v31, 'the Son of Man *must* suffer.' To suffer, to be rejected, to die, and to be raised, is what *must* flow out of who Jesus is.

You see, it's the answer to who he is, and why he must do what he must do that can tell you who *you* are and how *you* should live. Because it's Christ's identity that has the power to define your identity.

The Source of Identity

How do you find an identity? How do you decide, 'this is who I am'? You could take the way of expressive individualism. You decide who you are based on your feelings, and especially on your sexual desires. You *self*-identify. And to do that has taken on religious overtones. To publicly affirm others in their chosen identities is the way to prove your a good person, but if you do the opposite, and question someone's self-identity, you commit the unforgivable sin and risk excommunication as a heretic. And it's your identity - determined by you - that determines how you then live.

Or, you could do it the other way round, and define your identity by what you do, or what you have. And how you see yourself is intimately tied up with your relationships, or your career. And when those are going well, you feel secure about yourself. But when they're not, if your job ends, or your success falters, who are you then?

Well, here, Jesus shows us a different way. Look at v34-36, 'He said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself."'

You see, expressive individualism says, express yourself; find yourself inside yourself and express that - that's the way to life. Whereas Jesus is offering you an identity - meaning and purpose and significance - built on relationship with him: "If anyone would come after me." And whereas alarm bells start ringing for Peter when Jesus starts talking about suffering, and whereas expressive individualism says 'express yourself', Jesus says, no, if you really want to live, deny yourself. And whereas secular materialism says, get your identity from what you do, from what you earn, Jesus says in v36 that you can earn the whole world and still lose your soul. It's by dying to yourself that you live, it's in losing yourself that you find yourself, it's in giving up that you keep.

In other words, it's in becoming Christ's servant that you become truly free.

Now, if that takes some swallowing, look what he says next. Anyone who comes after him must, v34, 'take up his cross'. And it's hard to recapture the stigma of what a cross meant back then. Firstly, obviously, it was a means of execution. So someone carrying their cross was a dead man walking. And so Jesus is saying that to find your identity in him is to daily die to the temptation to find it elsewhere, in wealth or victimhood; in sex or success. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis, wrote, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.'

But a cross wasn't just *a* means of death, it was the most shameful of deaths. And Jesus is saying, if you really want to find life, embrace that shame. And when Mark first published this, in Nero's Rome, to be a Christian was shameful, but in a secular, materialistic, expressive individualistic age, it's becoming so again. And Jesus says, if you want to know real life, embrace that shame. Let him be the one who shapes who you are and what you do.

But why do that? I mean, secular materialism will give you a lot more toys, and expressive individualism will be a whole lot easier!

For two reasons. Number 1: because eternity matters: v35, "For whoever would save his life will lose it." You see, the expressive individualist, who wants to decide for himself who he is, and insists on that, risks losing the very thing they're trying to save. While the materialist is *also* in danger, v36, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" because he risks losing his identity to his wealth and success.

And Jesus told a parable about exactly that. A rich man and a poor beggar both die. And, despite being poor, Lazarus the beggar goes to Paradise, while the Rich Man ends up in Hell. But the strange thing it's Jesus' only parable where he gives a name to one of characters: Lazarus, the poor man. And you read it and think, why hasn't the rich man got a name? But then you realise, he does! He's Rich Man. His wealth is his identity. He's gained the world and lost himself.

But it doesn't have to be wealth. It could be your research output, or your family, or your reputation, or your looks. This thing, whatever it is, can become so much your thing, that it becomes your identity, and it consumes you. And what Jesus makes clear is that what you don't have now, you don't magically regain in eternity. The Rich Man continues being Rich Man, but that's all he is. He's become like his money, cold, lifeless, heartless.

And Jesus is saying, don't do that. Instead, come after me and die to the stuff that holds you. Because it's only by dying to it, that you can be truly you, and it can find its right and good place in your life.

Ok, but there's a second reason to find your identity in him. Go back to v31, where Jesus tells the disciples that 'the Son of Man *must* suffer.'

Why the *must*?

And the answer is, because of you. Because of me. Because of v37: "For what can a man give in return for his soul?" Now, why would you need to give something in return for your soul? Only if you owe it to someone. Only if you're in debt to someone and that debt is you.

And Jesus is saying, you owe God your life. You're in debt to him. The record of all the stuff you've done that you shouldn't have done, and all the stuff you should have done but you haven't, stands against you. It's like a spreadsheet of profit and loss, except everything's in the loss column. And the total debt adds up to your life.

And what can you give in exchange for that? How much money can you make and offer to God for that? How many papers can you publish? How many affirmative likes on social media can you click?

None of it will ever be enough, Jesus says. 'What can you give in exchange for you? Nothing. So I will give myself for you.'

And Jesus *had to* suffer that we might be healed. He was arrested that we might be freed. He was rejected, that we might be accepted by God our heavenly Father. And he was killed and raised to life, that we too might live.

You see Peter thinks the greatest enemy is Rome, to be defeated by military or political might. Jesus knows our greatest enemies are sin and death. And he defeats those by the seeming weakness of the cross.

So, why take up your cross and embrace the shame? Because he took up his cross and embraced the shame for you.

In his recent book, *The Madness of Crowds - Gender, Race and Identity*, Douglas Murray, who is gay and an atheist, recognises that we've got to find an alternative to the identity politics tearing our societies apart. And the solution he offers is that we need to rediscover a meaning and a purpose, an identity, that's not based on the politics of identity. He says we need to find a generosity towards others that transcends our differences, and we have to find a way to forgive. And he's right. The problem is he can't say how or why you can do any of those things.

But Christianity can. Because it gives you an identity that humbles you and lifts you up. It tells you, you are so indebted to God, Christ had to give his life for you. But you are so loved he did give his life for you. It can make you generous - not just in deed but in thought and word, because it tells you that when you were on the opposing side, Christ was infinitely generous to you. And it can make you forgiving, because when you didn't deserve it, Christ forgave you.

Expressive individualism and secular materialism can never give you a secure identity, or the grace of generosity and forgiveness. But Christ can give you all, and so much more.