

## **Saying the Unsayable Palm Sunday 2009, Year B**

Discretion is the one of the most difficult skills of adult living, a great test of evolving emotional intelligence. It is the art of making sure that we say the right thing to the right people at the right time, or rather that we don't say the wrong thing to the wrong people at the wrong time. Or to take it further, that we learn the discipline of keeping secrets, that we are able to refrain from just blabbing out tantalising gobbets of information that make us look like big shots who are in the know. That can be hard. Sometimes secrets burn a hole in us. We can become radio active with insider knowledge that clamours to get out, and to be widely known.

Throughout the developing story of Mark's gospel Jesus has refrained from revealing who he really is. Even when demons cry out the identity of the one who is casting them out, he shuts them up. Attempts to define him, or his mission, are brushed aside, or are deflected with circumlocutions. It is as though he believes that if he lets the cat out of the bag he will always be misunderstood, will always be misinterpreted - that people will take the startling news the wrong way, will get the wrong end of the stick, and will distort the knowledge of his true identity in disastrous ways. So people are left guessing, even his closest followers, and it is inevitable that they will try to have it out with him.

When that eventually happens, and Peter blurts out his correct intuitive guess, something fateful has happened. In her novel *The Illusionist* Anita Mason recasts this scene, and its dialogue, in a most revealing way. Jesus replies to Peter:

You have said something that should never have been said, and there will be a heavy price to pay...There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament God and his prophets wage war on the practice of idolatry. Often we can be puzzled at this recurring theme that seems to have so little relevance to us. We are not tempted to slaughter our pets, and to offer them in sacrifice to pagan deities. It wouldn't occur to us to engage in temple prostitution, or to leap over fires as part of the arts of divination. We might like to note though that according to the survey on New Zealander's religious attitudes that came out from Massey University last week more Kiwis believe in soothsayers and fortunetellers than in the teachings of organised religion.

For us who are in the household of faith it is important to realise that idolatry is a catch all phrase for a gone wrong attitude in every church in every time and place. We are tempted to remake God in our own image oh so often. We imagine him as a projection of our own dreams, and desires, and fantasies, and longings for consolation. Marx and Freud, both Jews, both unbelievers, were on to something when they dismissed religion as the projection of human desires, that God was just a blank screen on to which we projected ourselves and what we want writ large. That is the truth about a lot of unhealthy religion, and the Christian God hates it just as much as religion's cultured despisers.

The problem is that the natural religiosity of human beings was poisoned right from the start. In the creation story Adam and Eve are stand in figures for

the first primates, the first hominids, in the evolving chain of life to utter a prayer. But the problem is that the prayer is a selfish one – they ask for something that will be the unmaking of the human race, which will undermine human happiness from then on. And that means that the religious culture, which will develop alongside evolving humanity, is skewed towards selfish ends. Thus we have idolatry. So it is that even if God stood in front of us in human flesh telling us as a clear a bell who and what he is we will tend to misunderstand. There is a kind of built in gormlessness to the human race when it comes to apprehending religious truth.

Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed One...I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.

Finally the unsayable has been said, finally the truth has been fully disclosed, and because it has been said in front of the High Priest there is no possibility of misunderstanding. Every conversation in Mark's gospel has been leading up to this conversation. Its outcome will decide whether or not the people of God will become the renewed covenant people. From now on Jesus will not say anything. It is no longer necessary. His deeds and his words clearly disclose the choice that must be made.

In the desolating experience that is about to follow a very different kind of God will be revealed than that expected by the vainglorious imaginings of the human race. The God who is utterly other will surprise, and startle, and stun in what will follow. Can we keep up with him as he overturns all delusional thinking about who God is and what he does?

This Holy Week I will be asking myself some hard questions about how selfish my prayers are, and about how clear my perceptions are of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The more I get to grips with the message of the New Testament the more I end up asking myself – was I ever a Christian? I will try to see God straight, and not as I wish him to be. And I will try to pray that the Kingdom will come, that I will become a microcosm of it, and that I will do what God wants, rather than him doing what I want. Will you join me in this humbling task?