

Who do you think you are?

James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

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One of our insightful members said recently: “I think if you want to learn more about yourself, you may do so through the eyes of others”. He said it about church communities in the context of inter-Faith dialogue, but I am sure he also meant it in an individual sense applied to human relationships in general.

Well, I remember how we put this statement to the test when I was a teenager. I belonged to a group of friends, who did everything together, went to excursions and parties, went to church together and had great, deep discussions about life and love and the universe – as you do at that age. One day, someone came up with the bright idea to have a so-called ‘honesty hour’. This meant telling *honestly*, in the hearing of everyone what we thought of each other. We all agreed it would be a worthy challenge and our friendship would be the stronger for it. How little did we know! Sure, initially, it was a liberating experience to bring out your hidden opinions, but we didn’t count on the fall-out, when the limelight turned on us. We didn’t like that. It was a disaster! Afterwards we may have pretended that nothing had changed, but, in fact, things were never the same again between us. Only those friendships survived that could take on board each other’s perceptions and I am sorry to say, most of us couldn’t.

Is Jesus stoking up controversy like this, by inviting his disciples to speak up about him in our Gospel reading? As a result, is Peter losing all his credentials with Jesus by blurting out, ‘You are the Messiah’? Or is it the other way round when Jesus rejects the title and starts talking about his future, including suffering and dying and calls Peter Satan? It seems, receiving other people’s honest opinion about us, could be a painful experience. Knowing the usual understanding of the title ‘Messiah’, Jesus doesn’t want to be called that Messiah

(certainly not in Mark’s Gospel). In his turn, Peter, who has just given the highest accolade to Jesus, does not want to be called Satan. Ian made a very interesting observation the other day as he was talking about words spoken in the pulpit and how those same words might be heard or understood by the congregation. He said, sometimes it could be like they are divided by the Grand Canyon.

Is this what’s happening here between Jesus and Peter? And if it is, where do they go from here? Where do we go from the point when we get hurt by others’ speech, or when our words may have inadvertently hurt others? And it can happen so easily. How many times do we have to apologise, ‘I didn’t mean it like that’. Is honesty in human relationships overrated then? Well, we know we all want approval and positive feedback and any kind of ‘constructive criticism’ throws us into a defensive mode. But, don’t we also want to grow and improve, so that we can be the best version of ourselves? Can we do that by simply relying on our own self-knowledge? Going by my experience, I don’t think so.

I love the insight of the ancient sages, who produced the story of Creation in the Bible and expressed the divine intention by the immortal words: ‘It’s not good for the man to be alone’. Or reading it in a more contemporary way: It’s not good for a human being to be alone. Amongst other things I take this to mean that we can only achieve our human potential and our fulfilment in life, in the company of others, even if it is not in the formal family setting of two parents and 2.4 children. We do not have to live purely by others’ opinions, of course, but we do need the corrective they may offer to us.

Well, we tend to side with Peter in this exchange at Caesarea Philippi. Even though he must have been quite fierce as he turned on Jesus and rebuked him, we can say in his defence, that after all he did reveal the great truth about Jesus. But in the light of Jesus’ reaction, perhaps Peter’s words revealed more about himself than about Jesus. When we say ungracious things, or use ill-chosen words in the heat

of the moment – the words do not come from nowhere. They bring to the surface something that is brewing inside us. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel: *"It is from the fullness of the heart that the mouth speaks"* (Mat 12:34) In Peter's case, his words revealed his deepest hopes and dreams and perhaps the kind of future he imagined for himself: as the right-hand man of a future ruler.

And what can we say about Jesus' harsh words? Where do they come from? Of course, we can only speculate about these things, but it is possible that Peter's vision of the Messiah touched an ongoing temptation deep within Jesus himself. We know it started in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry and it was with him even in the Garden of Getsemane right before his crucifixion. I find this possibility a very helpful one. It shows us the human Jesus, who in many respects is like us. It makes us trust him more than we would a purely ethereal, unearthly being. It makes us understand his outbursts and makes us want to know how he deals with his demons.

To me the good news of this otherwise quite difficult and dark passage is, what the gospel writer does not say, only implies. In spite of this fierce exchange of words, Jesus does not abandon Peter. Neither does Peter take the words literally and clear out of Jesus' sight for good. There is a way back from the edge of the precipice, just as there is one for us when we are threatened with a breakdown in our relationships. It is the recognition that our truth of others is never the complete picture. We are all works in progress. We can hardly know ourselves, let alone know what's in other people's hearts.

And the second piece of good news is that, when we grapple with our self-identity, and want to know whom to believe, others' opinion or our own feelings, Jesus offers a third option. He says to Peter: try to forget about yourself or anyone else and look to the One, who created you and knows all about you. God gave you the capacity to think divine thoughts and speak with the voice of divine love and

compassion, act in divine justice and mercy. You can do it. That's what I am trying to do, follow me! And if the road is tough and you stumble, you can get up and keep going. God will see us through right to the end and beyond. Let it be so in our lives too.

*Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church*