

Sabbatical Reflections

Proverbs 1:20-33

Mark 8:27-29

To answer the most pressing question – yes!!!! I had a wonderful summer! I learned a lot, saw a lot, was challenged, and, I know it won't really surprise you who know me so well, did a bit of challenging myself. I still have lots to mull over (and yes, that's a very bad pun from one who spent time on Mull!) For those who haven't had access to my blog, I discovered that I'd planned about 4 months' worth of sabbatical into 3 months, so needed to catch my breath when I got home, but I still wouldn't change a single minute of it well, maybe I'd like to make my connection in Toronto and not have to spend an extra five hours waiting at Pearson. But that's the price of travel, and since all of the essential pieces fell into place, I really have little to complain about.

When I looked at the lectionary readings for this week, and saw the summary for the Gospel lesson, it struck me that it really couldn't have been more appropriate. For the underlying theme that ran through my whole sabbatical time, evolving and emerging as the summer progressed was the question that Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do YOU say I am?" From June until September, and even now the question continues to resonate: "Who do you say I am?"

Who is Jesus for you? Who is Jesus for the person sitting beside you, or behind you, or above you, or facing you? Because one of the realities that came home to me repeatedly over this sabbatical time, is that my Jesus may not be your Jesus, that the man I follow and the qualities that I most admire, may not be the same for you, or your neighbour. There were times this summer when I wondered if some of us were speaking about the same man, if we read the same Bible. We were, we do, but what we take from that reading, and what we understand differs radically. And what we know and understand influences how we react and interact.

Perhaps one of the most startling aspects of my conversations in Scotland and England is how we speak about one another, and how certain statements flow in conversation. If I were to speak of my neighbours, I might tell you that they don't attend church. If I were to speak of those who are closer to me, I might say it with a sigh. That's familiar. But repeatedly in my conversations over there, I heard or was told, "I'm nothing really, I'm certainly not a Christian." Or, in speaking of a family member, "He isn't here, but then he isn't a Christian." Where I would plead ignorance, they made fairly sweeping statements. And I was not then, and am not now, in a position to assess whether those statements were accurate or not, though I found it absolutely fascinating that we had at least 3 self-declared 'non-Christians' in our midst. And there were others who spoke freely about how they hadn't been a Christian for very long.

Equally telling, were the comments that were made. Statements such as: "I really like that man Jesus. I really admire the way he lived his life. But I can't see any connection between him and Christians."

In their honesty they were affirming what I had started my summer exploring: the disconnect between the Christian church and the rest of world. It might surprise you to know that when people are looking for the spiritual, and they are, the last place they think of looking is the church. They don't necessarily perceive us as spiritual people, and even more unfortunately, they don't see any connection between Jesus and us. They don't see, in how we live our lives, the answer to the question: "Who do you I am?"

Throughout much of the past year we have been involved in conversations with our sister United churches in the city of Windsor, talking about our vision, our dreams and our goals, exploring how we can work and relate together ... but this summer, it struck me that what we really need to be about, is discerning who Jesus is for us: miracle worker,

wonderful teacher, excellent pastor or shepherd, mighty avenger, superhero, or rescuer extraordinaire ... And determining what that means for us. And once we begin to define who Jesus is for us, and believe me, I'm still excavating layers that have been buried deep, through years of Sunday School, study, hymn singing (and you'd be amazed at how much our hymns have shaped our perceptions, whether the theology is good or bad, accurate or a reflection of an era) and living, then we can try to see how our answer connects with the world around us. We can find ways of connecting who we follow, with what we do, and how we respond to the issues that grip the church and unchurched alike.

It isn't enough to echo Peter and say, "You are the Messiah." For what does Messiah mean to you? It almost certainly means something different from what Messiah means to me, and even more to the point, it certainly isn't relevant to many people outside our doors. The challenge is to let go of safe cliches, pious language, and our artful dodges, and become as real as Jesus to those around us. That's part of what has come back with me from sabbatical, the mission to search with you to find the way to reconnect with those who admire Jesus but fail to see him here.

Jesus walks with his disciples and he asks: "Who do people say I am?" And they tell him what they've heard. And then he turns and looking straight into our eyes, he asks: "And you, who do you say I am?" Amen