

May the words on my lips and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Many of you will probably be familiar with that pithy saying attributed to C S Lewis, that Jesus was either **mad, bad or God**.

I think the quote is actually a reduction to soundbite proportions of something he wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*. The underlying question was ‘**Who is Jesus Christ?**’, or in the words of Jesus himself, ‘Who do men say that I am?’

Lewis was trying to prevent people from saying something about Jesus Christ that he thought was really foolish, something that in fact often was said about him in Lewis’s day, is perhaps said even more readily in our day, and I suspect was said even in Jesus’ own day by some. That something was, in Lewis’s words, *I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great **moral teacher**, but I don’t accept his claim to be **God**.*

That, says Lewis, is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man, and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level, Lewis says, with a man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must take your choice, says Lewis. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.

Who Jesus was and is is, I think, the **question** that underlies our readings today. This **Transfiguration** story gives **Luke’s answer** to the question. But let’s look at the **question** first.

It comes just before the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do men say that I am?* They reply that some say Jesus is John the Baptist revived, or that he is a prophet from old newly arisen. But Jesus presses them: *But who do **you** say that I am?* This seems to be a very important question. Peter’s answer is: *You are the Messiah of God.*

This appears not to be the answer Jesus wants for he rebukes the disciples and orders them sternly to tell no-one. Perhaps this is because they have not grasped his understanding of the kind of messiah he is, have not heeded his prediction of all that he must accomplish in Jerusalem. This kind of messiah is not what the disciples were expecting. It did not fit with their anticipation of a victorious leader, even king and liberator for Israel.

Luke then gives his **answer** to the question of **Jesus’ identity** through the Transfiguration story. In his chronology, it is about 8 days after the questioning that Jesus takes Peter and John and James up the mountain and his appearance is utterly transformed. In place of his humanity there appear many **signs of divinity**, signs of **God’s presence and glory**.

Firstly, the experience takes place on a **mountain** (ie somewhere close to God, and the place where God often appears, as he did to Moses when giving the 10 Commandments).

Secondly, the **face** of Jesus changed in appearance (as did the face of Moses which shone as he descended from the mountain holding the two tablets of the covenant in his hand. His face

shone because he had been speaking with God, and his face now reflected God's glory).

Thirdly the **clothes** of Jesus became dazzling **white** (a colour associated with joy and celebration - hence our white altar frontal and vestments today). In our OT reading we heard how the Ancient of Days had garments *white as snow*.

And then there is the **cloud** that came down over the mountain top and overshadowed them all (reminiscent of the cloudy pillar that led Moses and the exiles in the wilderness).

And lastly there is the **voice** coming from the cloud that says, *This is my Son, my Chosen*, (so reminiscent of the Baptism of Jesus).

All these signs indicate the presence of **God**. It would seem that Luke has placed them there quite deliberately to state categorically that Jesus is divine.

And yet, there are **other features** of this gospel that suggest that for the disciples, even for Luke, and for his audience the nature of Jesus' messianic status was not quite so clear. There is still **misunderstanding of Jesus' true identity**.

As **Peter** witnesses the Transfiguration, he offers to build three dwellings (one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah). This seems to suggest that Peter views all three as equal in rank; that is all prophets, and all human only.

Luke's stories of the birth of Jesus certainly identify Jesus as the Messiah: *Today in the city of David a Saviour has been born for you. He is Lord Messiah* (2:11). And Simeon receives a pledge via the Holy Spirit that he will not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah (2:26)

Jesus is recognised for who he truly is at one point in Luke's gospel, that is by the Gerasene Demoniac who shouts out to Jesus: *What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?* But elsewhere in Luke's Gospel there seems to be doubt. The people had expectations concerning John, wondering inwardly whether he might be the Messiah (3:15).

So there seems to be a **question** for Luke and his audience (and by extension us too) about who Jesus was: not quite whether he was **mad, bad or God**, but whether or not he could have been the Messiah, given what happened to him.

The **Transfiguration** story is **Luke's answer** to that question of Jesus' identity. He most definitely is the Messiah, despite all that has befallen him on the Cross. And Luke is making it clear that this Jesus is no earthly Messiah, but rather has divine status.

This question and the answer Luke offers is important for us now, as well as for the disciples and evangelist then. At risk of sounding rather irreverent, **one might ask if it matters whether or not Jesus is divine**. Can we not still follow his example and moral teaching, even if he is not divine?

This is a live question today, even in some parts of the church, as I discovered through an academic study I came across, carried out by researchers just a few years ago, into the beliefs of some ordinary churchgoers. Out of a sample of 45 people interviewed in depth, 39 were not prepared to say that Jesus was divine. They were happy to think of him as a great moral teacher (*pace*, Lewis!). They were even prepared to acknowledge him as their Saviour. But they were not prepared to say that he was God.

There is of course one **big snag** with denying the divinity of Jesus, as Lewis realised, but these ordinary churchgoers apparently did not. **Salvation!** Humanity does not have the power to save itself, as is only too clear within our world. Only God can save humanity.

And there are **further problems** if Jesus is not divine: the cross becomes meaningless and powerless; the sacrifice of God out of love for humanity is diminished if Jesus is not his Son; to worship Jesus would be idolatry were he merely human; and he cannot intercede for us with the Father or open the gates of heaven offering us eternal life if he is not divine. These are all serious **theological problems**, which in turn can become serious **problems for faith**.

Jesus' first **question** to his disciples was: *Who do men say that I am?* But he then presses for a personal response: *But who do you say that I am?*

C S Lewis may well be anxious that we do not make a theological blunder by labelling Jesus mad or bad rather than God. But he cannot tell us what to think or what to believe.

Luke is clearly trying to help us answer the question of Jesus' true identity through this Transfiguration story. He is telling us that Jesus is more than a prophet, more than a moral teacher, more than the long-awaited Messiah, more even than the anointed one of God. Rather, he is one who **shares the glory of God himself**.

To answer the underlying question of who Jesus is remains a **challenge** for all Christians. We must not follow *cleverly devised myths*, as our reading from Peter's letter said. We each have to make up our own mind about the identity of Jesus. That is what He asks.