

Names of Jesus: The Messiah ... the Christ

Sermon for St Paul's 14th December 2008

Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12 and Matthew 16:13-16

OK. First, a little market research. Hands up all those who believe in Santa Claus.

Santa Claus, as everyone here knows for a fact, is a large white-bearded man in a red and white suit who lives at the North Pole and brings toys each year to children who have been good. He arrives on our rooves on Christmas Eve in a flying sleigh drawn by a bunch of flying reindeer with German names, including one named Rudolph who has a nose as bright as the headlights on a rally car. Santa then comes down the chimney in your house, which at our place is quite a trick, since the chimney on the Coonara would be a tight fit for a possum.

When I was a child, I thought like a child. And I accepted the Santa Claus story. After all, the ends justified the means.

Dr Karl Kruszelnicki writes a weekly column in the "Good Weekend." His column is called Myth Conceptions. I always read it. And I often discover that something I believed to be God's Honest Truth, is in fact a myth.

There's also a program on the telly called *Mythbusters* which for the information of anyone under 25 is a play on words of a 1984 movie called *Ghostbusters*. These mythbuster guys take great delight in trying to prove that something we believed to be God's Honest Truth is not. Although one does get the impression that their main life motivation consists of finding more and more ingenious ways of blowing things up.

There are many things that we believe to be God's Honest Truth that simply aren't. Things we believe to be true, that are not true.

For example, for most of my childhood my family had the pleasure of holidaying at the beach at my grandparents house. There was a rule to be strictly observed: a truth be religiously honoured.

Wait one hour after eating before entering the surf. If you go into the surf within one hour of eating, you will get a stomach cramp and you will drown. This myth, and it IS a myth by the way, was intoned to us as if it were the law of the Medes and Persians, and that, if we only studied the Scriptures more diligently we would surely find it in Leviticus or, maybe, Exodus. *And the Lord said unto the children of Israel, you must wait upon the Lord one hour after devouring the food of the land before entering the Red Sea.*

But no. It turns out it's a myth. People do get cramps when swimming. But cramps while swimming are not life-threatening provided the swimmer doesn't panic. Panic might drown you. A cramp won't.

And anyway cramps may happen regardless of your menu. We know that cramps are related to overexertion, not lunch.

So no more child abuse at the seaside please. I remember that one hour after lunch rule with great resentment. The surf at North Avoca Beach was, and doubtless still is, the most seductive invitation to abandonment and pure joy. And one hour watching all those surging, curling, tumbling waves, missed. One hour for a ten year old surfer boy is at least four ordinary adult hours. Four boy hours of waste and agony. I forgive you Mum. But I remember.

Anyway, what's all this got to do with today's topic, which is "The Names of Jesus" and, specifically, the names *Messiah* and *Christ*.

Well, when Jesus came along, the people already had pretty much worked out what these words meant. They had quite fixed ideas about what the Messiah would look like. And, like Mums who think there's a one hour prohibition on catching waves, they were mostly wrong. More about that later.

So before that, I need to make some things clear.

First, these two names of Jesus are titles. Jesus is THE Messiah. He is THE Christ. I would reckon there's a lot of people who think *Christ* is Jesus' surname. We hear *Jesus* and *Christ* side by side all the time. We say the Lord Jesus Christ. And lots of people think that his Dad's name must have been Joseph Christ, son of a long line of the Christ family, who married Mary not-Christ, who then became Mrs Mary Christ.

Well, no. In the phrase the *Lord Jesus Christ*, both *Lord* and *Christ* are titles, not names the same way *Jesus* is a name. Probably everyone here knows this stuff, but I say this just to be sure we are all on the same track.

The second thing we all have to agree about is that the words *Messiah* and *Christ* have exactly the same meaning. They are words for the same idea, but in two different languages. *Messiah* is the Hebrew word; *Christ* is the Greek word. Just as *bridge* in English and *pont* in French mean the same thing. Just as *schmetterling* in German, and *papillon* in French, both mean the same as *butterfly* in English. Although it sounds much prettier in French.

So *Messiah* and *Christ* are two words in different languages that mean the same thing. But what do they mean? A-hah. There's the rub. Because there is both myth and truth in the way these words have been understood both before and after Jesus.

If you had a dictionary around the time of the Old Testament Prophets, you would have looked up *Messiah* and the dictionary would have given a definition a bit like this:

Messiah: the anointed one.

OK. But what does that mean? In the religious practices of the Hebrews there was a ceremony in which a person who had been selected for a special service, say, as a priest, would be sprinkled with oil. This sprinkling was called *anointing*. It was also the way a King would be inducted. In the English tradition we would say a King was crowned. In the Jewish tradition a king was anointed with oil.

So, if you knew about anointing, you knew that someone called the Messiah was not merely the anointed one, he or she, was selected or chosen for the task. Well, down through the years, the idea of the Messiah came to represent not just anyone was anointed or chosen, but the one who was, or would be, chosen specifically by God Himself. So the Messiah would be the one divinely chosen by God.

So far so good. Everyone would be in agreement in Old Testament times with my analysis so far. It was the next bit that got to be sometimes myth, sometimes true. Because it was one thing to say that someone would come along as Messiah, God's chosen person, but it was another thing to say what he would be like, and more significantly, what he would DO.

And in that dilemma, many of the people who yearned for a Messiah set themselves up for disappointment and confusion.

Have you ever been disappointed? Something that you hoped would be wonderful, and then, when the day comes, it's a bit of a fizzer? Or everything just goes pear shaped?

Yesterday, some of us went to a wedding. It was a wedding that was supposed to be held outdoors. In the bright sunshine. In the open air. We were told it was the bride's special desire to have an outdoor wedding.

It was a happy wedding still. But, I guess, some were a bit disappointed that we had to hold the ceremony inside.

Well, something like that happened for the Hebrew people. They had this idea about who the Messiah would be. And, for them, Jesus was a bit of a disappointment. The way they thought about it, the Messiah was to be a son of King David, generally recognised as the greatest of Israel's kings. Some expected a temporal king, a literal king, like David. In their view "Son of David" meant a person who would inherit King David's wisdom and kingly power. Someone who should make the Jews as great a people as ever, or even greater.

And, as they looked around their world, at the ignorance of their oppressors and all of their neighbours there seemed to be a real need of a deliverer, not only for Israel themselves, but for "all nations." The true Messiah was to be an instrument by whom God's great purpose for mankind was to be carried out by a sacrificial work. They had been practising a sacrificial religion since the

beginning, so they naturally thought in those terms. What they didn't imagine was that the Messiah might actually come to do away with sacrifice forever. That in Jesus, the Messiah, we would see the last sacrifice. Or, at least, the last necessary one.

The idea of a Messiah is very old. As old as the history of the Hebrew nation themselves. You can find it in writings from before the time of Moses. It is clear in the blessing of Jacob, and in the psalms of David, and the prophesies of Isaiah, Daniel, and plenty of other places.

The expectation of a "golden age" was a common belief among the ancient nations, not merely a belief of the Jews. But the Jews added to this idea of a Golden Age, the particular person, the Messiah, who was to reign in that good time. Even today, modern Jews pray at ever meal, "Merciful God, make us worthy of seeing the days of the Messiah."

Well, when Jesus came, they got a quite different Messiah. Jesus the Christ exploded some of their myths. He reinterpreted the prophets, presenting a Messiah that few had thought about.

For some people, the result was disappointment. There's a popular idea that Judas was one such. A disappointed one. It's pretty much pure speculation, but not unreasonable speculation to think of Judas as someone who wanted Jesus to be the great warrior Messiah. He thought, if only I can tip his hand, Jesus will be forced to overthrow the oppressors. So the tactic Judas used was to betray him to the authorities in the hope that Jesus would finally rise to his calling as the new warrior King David. And the fight would be on for one and all.

But, of course, Judas, if he had thought like this, and we really don't know, Judas would have been both wrong and profoundly disappointed. Maybe enough even to commit suicide, which, of course, he did.

So it's fair to say that many were disappointed with the version of the Messiah they saw in Jesus. And many others simply refused to see Jesus as the Messiah. He didn't fit their preconceptions so he couldn't be the Messiah. Q.E.D.

Certainly those of the Jewish faith today are still waiting for the Messiah, because the person they see in Jesus doesn't fit their preconceptions.

I said before that while some people were disappointed with Jesus' version of the Messiah, others were confused. And, I reckon, it was among the confused that myth was displaced by truth. Their confusion led them to rethink their understanding. And in thinking again, they saw a new truth. A truth about the Messiah that was not merely different from what they had believed, but better. Much better. These confused rethinkers were the foundation of our church. The early disciples. The ones who saw in Jesus a new way to interpret the Messiah idea, and realised this new interpretation was not merely true, but had the power to change the world. To change themselves. And the world. Both.

Yesterday some of us went to a wedding. It made me recall a similar event just over forty years ago when Judy Beeston married Philip Hunt, for better or worse, richer or poorer, etc.

Do you remember what you thought married life would be like *before* you married? I was 20 when I got married. Judy, of course, was *much* younger. Or so the myth goes.

Anyway, I don't think I thought much about what married life would be like. I just knew I wanted to be with Judy forever. So I reckon what was in my head in those days was that life in marriage would just be an extension of life before marriage.

Our life together before marriage was full of music, performances, parties, long drives, and church camps. And, for a while, these things continued, but there were other things that I hadn't thought about.

For a start, our parents weren't around. We moved from Brisbane to the Sunshine Coast. And all the week long there was just us. We had to turn a flat into a home. Cope with our incompatible work schedules. Judy was working day hours in a legal firm. My day ended at 10 pm when the radio station I worked for closed for the night. Yes, children, in those days radio stations turned off at night! Hard to believe, I know, but true. Not a myth.

These were all new experiences for me. And it wasn't that I didn't enjoy all these things about being a married couple. It was just that they hadn't occurred to me. I hadn't considered these aspects of married life. So some of the implications were disappointing, or confusing.

And then, of course, children. I remember the manager of the radio station asking me when we were going to have children. And I replied that we were not yet ready for children. He, a Catholic father of a growing brood of kids, replied, "You'll never be *ready* for children."

I did not imagine correctly what life with children would be like. If I thought about it all, it was about warm cuddles of gently sleeping cherubic babies, and playing catch with uncoordinated two year olds. Well, I got that right, but I hadn't thought about the cherubic baby that wanted to cry for hours at a time and then throw up on you. Or the way that suddenly your whole life as a couple was tipped on its side to fit around the needs of this mewling, cranky, but sometimes cherubic baby.

Was I disappointed by all this? Not at all. Surprised. Confused. Sure. But not disappointed. Because I discovered that the actual experience was much more interesting, exciting and, well, maturing, than anything I had imagined.

The experience of making a family was very different from what I had imagined, and it was much BETTER than I imagined. Looking back, I don't regret a second of it. I'm sure many of you resonate with this. Anyway, one thing I discovered was that I had the good fortune to marry someone who was much better at the dirty work of children than me. If a child was exploding from any orifice, Judy was always quickly there to clean and comfort. Now THAT was something I hadn't predicted when I proposed.

Well, all this is just to try to draw some real life parallels with what happened to the disciples when, as they journeyed with Jesus, they discovered that the mythical Messiah of their imaginings was altogether different from the reality of Jesus the Christ.

They discovered that this Messiah, the real Messiah, was something they hadn't predicted. But it was good. It was very good.

So, when Jesus asks "Who do you say I am?" and Simon declares, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" what kind of Christ is Simon talking about?

Well, it's clear that even Simon (not yet named Peter), who makes this statement of conviction hasn't quite got the myth out of his head. He says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" and Jesus agrees that he has got that right. But then just after the passage we heard read today, is this verse:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Wait a minute!!

The Bible says "Simon Peter took him aside". Suffer? Be killed? That's not supposed to happen to the Messiah. At least, that's not supposed to happen to the mythical Messiah in Peter's head.

There are two important takeaways for me from this reading this morning.

The first one is I'm encouraged. I don't have to beat myself up when I find I am buying into the myths about who Jesus is. None of us knows all the truth about Jesus. And many of us will continue to believe myths about Jesus until we meet him in Heaven. Peter knew Jesus probably better than we ever shall, and he couldn't get it right. So let's not be too sad if we can't do better than Peter.

For me the second important takeaway is what Peter does here. When Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Peter does not offer an opinion. He offers a conviction. He makes a belief statement. He speaks as a Believer. Peter, impulsive Peter, just blurts out "You are the son of the Living God."

There's nothing wishy-washy or half-hearted about Peter's response. He doesn't say "Well, I reckon you just might be the Messiah." Others thought Jesus might be Isaiah or Jeremiah. But there is no "might be" about Peter's response. He says what he believes. He makes a confession.

"You are the Christ, the son of the Living God."

And here, in Peter's response, is the Christian response to a fallen world.

Because opinions won't change the world. Convictions will.

An opinion can be offered by a spectator. And it can have no consequences. No consequences for the person offering the opinion.

But when someone makes a statement of conviction they become an actor in the drama. In the drama of the world. People with convictions change the world. People with convictions make history.

People who state their convictions play a part in the drama of the in-breaking of the Christian revelation in the world.

The theologian, Gil Bailie, puts it this way:

"What Peter does ... He's still Simon at this moment, but he gets the name Peter precisely because the statement of conviction, the confession, as opposed to a mere opinion, has such profound consequences for Peter's very being that his old name doesn't work any more. We would say it has ontological consequences for Peter. That's just a big word way of saying his Being is changed. Something new has happened to Peter. He has become a new person because of what he has said. With utter conviction. A statement of conviction makes us new.

"And not only does it make us new. It makes the world new. It brings something new into history. What did Peter's confession bring new into history? The church. On this rock I will build my church.

"So a statement of conviction, as opposed to a mere opinion, transforms the person who makes the statement. And alters history by bringing the Christian revelation to bear on the situation."

We shall do a lot of stuff over these next few weeks. We'll have gift giving, decorate trees, sing about white Christmases, watch former Australian idol winners at the Myer Music Bowl struggle through a Christmas hymn, eat too much turkey and too many sweets, and listen for the patter of reindeer feet on the roof. It's all nice and I don't intend to miss any of it.

But our real response to Jesus the Christ, the central character of Christmas, is the only thing that will really make a difference in the world. And the question Jesus asks us, is the same question he posed to Simon, now called Peter. Jesus says, "I know what other people say about me, but I want to ask you this ... who do YOU say that I am."

May we all be able to answer, in every circumstance of life, "Jesus, you are the Christ, the son of the living God."

A-men.