

What are people saying? Who do they think I am?

Can you imagine Jesus asking his disciples this question in 2023? In our day there is absolutely no avoiding people's opinions. Whether on tiktok or twitter or the "reckons" of talkback radio, or in the comments section on an online news article, there can be no doubt about what the whole world is thinking, about anything. We are absolutely awash in "what people say," and sadly a great deal of what they say is woefully uninformed, if not actively shaped by misinformation.

But Jesus wasn't living in the digital age so he checks out the word on the street about his identity and learns that some people were guessing John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets...all of them off the mark.

Jesus is only partially interested in what "people" were saying, though. His real question, and the one he's leading up to, is for those who'd spent time with him, lived with him, eaten with him, heard his private teaching, and prayed with him. "*You, my friends,*" Jesus says, "who do *you* say that I am?" And Simon Peter has one of his more fabulous moments and confesses, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

The reason Peter could name this truth about Jesus when most people couldn't, isn't just that he'd spent more time around Jesus than the general public.

Jesus tells Peter that his response had come from a place beyond what his normal thinking mind was able to comprehend. He had *received this revelation from God*. He was empowered to make his confession because his intellect and understanding, his "flesh and blood" ways of knowing, were transformed in that moment by spiritual awareness, a glimpse of something suddenly piercingly, astonishingly and wonderfully true, something far beyond what Peter could conceive of on his own.

It's this awareness, this receptivity to revelation from God, that is the distinctive mark of the Church. It's what enables us to look on a wandering rabbi, a disgraced and tortured criminal, and name him as God. It's what causes us to accept that the last will be first and the first will be last, and to align ourselves with what looks like the losing side when we're faced with oppression and injustice.

Our faith has been respectable and socially sanctioned for such a long time that we often lose sight of just how scandalous and absurd it was when the disciples first got up in public and proclaimed Christ crucified as the Lord of all, because that was what had been revealed to them. They looked on his scars and said “my Lord and my God” and they recognised his risen presence in the bread, broken and blessed. And it was God’s Spirit that transformed their vision and enabled them to make this confession.

“People,” in Jesus day and now, say all sorts of things. Increasingly, what “people” say about God, about reality, about truth, is distorted and blinkered. Thanks to global media and constant partisan news streaming and social media feeds, people’s minds are becoming enslaved by ideology and division, captive to a flow of lies and fear-mongering, entrenched in positions that echo their tribe within the culture wars. It can be hard to know who to trust, and to weed out the bias and illusion and habit within our own hearts and minds.

In the end, the only true seeing and naming comes from God’s Spirit. It is *revealed to us*. That’s why Paul says to his friends in Rome: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may *discern* what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.” In other words, don’t just line yourself up with what “people are saying,” because they don’t know Christ as you do. This world is subject to a whole lot of forces that are quite deliberately leading it into lies and destruction. Don’t be conformed to that world by parroting the reckons of “people.”

Instead, “be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Paul does not mean simply do more research, learn more, think harder, or change the political lenses you’re using to filter the world’s ideas. All of that is still what Jesus meant by “flesh and blood.” Genuine renewal is learning to receive the mind of God into our own in prayer, and having our wisdom and our imaginations set on fire by God’s revelation in Scripture and nature. It means opening ourselves to spiritual awareness, the discernment that comes from the Spirit dwelling in our hearts.

God’s revelation comes to us in all sorts of ways. It can come through conversation, music, art, nature or something we’ve read or learned. Discernment uses the same sensory apparatus that we use to do our normal thinking and feeling. But it’s not the same as the process we use when we’re analysing and making opinions.

It's our deep mind, our intuitive mind, our right-hemisphere whole-seeing mind that receives spiritual insight, and our culture and often even the church aren't very good at knowing how to access that way of seeing.

We have to test any revelation we think we've received by the way it echoes with Jesus' words and ways in Scripture and how it moves us – to tears, to joy, to action that surprises and possibly terrifies us.

It is also vital to submit what we believe has come from God to the discernment of the faith community. None of us as individuals gets to decide that we, and we alone, have rightly heard the voice of God.

But if we do feel we've heard from God, and we've tested that, we will almost certainly have to do something with it.

There is a work to do, to release captives, uplift the poor, proclaim good news, give new sight, heal wounds, and resist oppression in all its forms. It will take all the different members of Christ's body, with all our different gifts, to do it.

What to do, when, and how, requires discernment and revelation. We can't use the poor light of "flesh and blood" politics and ideology to guide our way. While we should be engaged in our world and vote and be as activist as we feel led to be, no political party or system of ideas or new economic model is going to manifest the kingdom of God. That task has been given to the Church.

We will make a poor job of it. The Church always has. And there is a contest, an opposition abroad in this world that is very real and that wants us to fail. The "gates of Hades," the forces of dis-creation, are pressing against the Church, but they will not prevail against a people who have learned to name Christ truly, who have received his Spirit and who are being transformed by the renewing of their minds.

The closer we come to Christ, the more we train our minds and hearts and spirits to receive the revelation of God, and the more we refuse to be conformed to "what people are saying," the more our actions will align with God's "good, acceptable and perfect" will. Then, in small and imperfect ways, as flickering candle-light in the darkness, God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven.

*Introduce 'O Church arise', qualifiers about militaristic language, invitation to join in when ready.*