

However, the word “must” speaks of the divine plan – otherwise, the outcome will not be resurrection on the third day.

**Reflect:**

- To what extent would we prefer a Jesus who is Example, Teacher, Healer, Leader... without the suffering-and-death bit?
- “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (v. 24). The suffering and death of Jesus was unique. Yet the way of the Christ becomes the way of the Christian. What will this mean for us?



Five Lenten Studies  
by Peter J Blackburn

# 1. The Way of the Christ

**Reading: Matthew 16.13-28**

It may come in many different shapes and sizes, but there is no doubt about it – the distinctive symbol of Christianity is the cross. It distinguishes churches from other buildings, adorns necks and ears, marks out graves...

Yet the cross was a sign of rejection, a sentence for criminals, a humiliating and degrading exposure, a cruel and torturous death. How then do Christians sing, “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time”? What religion would want a cross as its distinguishing mark, or would cherish it as a great climax of its founder’s life?

Of course, we see the cross in the light of the resurrection. The cross wasn’t the end of Jesus after all. Yet to the two on the road to Emmaus, we hear the “stranger” say, “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Lk. 24.26)

In Jerusalem, many pilgrims walk the *Via Dolorosa* – the “sorrowful way”. It is the traditional “way of the cross” with plaques and chapels and shrines marking events on the way from Pilate’s judgment hall to the place of crucifixion. The issue for Jesus’ disciples was this – is the way of the cross the way of the Christ (Messiah)?

**Reflect:**

- Why has the cross become the central symbol of the Christian faith?
- Even when folk have little or no connections with any church, they still often want a cross on the headstone of a loved one. Why is this so?

Study 2. Kingdom Service. Reading: Matthew 20.1-28

© Peter J Blackburn 2004. Permission is given for this to be reproduced for individual or group use. Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version* © International Bible Society 1984.

## Who is Jesus?

### Read: Matthew 16.13-20

Caesarea Philippi was in the far north near Mount Hermon and the headwaters of the Jordan River. Originally called Paneas, there was a shrine to the Greek god Pan. Herod's son Philip had rebuilt it under the name Caesarea Philippi.

This was rather much a pagan region, away from the Jewish crowds. For this reason it was an ideal spot to ask key questions – how were the crowds perceiving Jesus? and his closest friends, the disciples, what was their understanding of his identity?

Jesus deliberately referred to himself as “the Son of Man” – some 81 times in the gospels. It wasn't a term the Jews used for the expected Messiah. Sometimes in the Old Testament ‘son of man’ simply refers to a “human being” (as in Ps. 8.4). It is used 93 times in Ezekiel, emphasising the prophet's humanity in the presence of the Sovereign Lord. Very significant, however, is the use of the phrase in Daniel 7.13-14 where the prophet has a vision of “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... given authority, glory and sovereign power... an everlasting dominion that will not pass away...”

For most of Jesus' ministry the term “Son of Man” hid his identity. It was during his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin that he made it clear he was the “son of man” of Daniel (Mt. 26.64), a connection immediately recognised by the high priest and other members of the council.

Back at Caesarea Philippi there was no expectation that the crowd or even the disciples had made that connection. The question was direct – “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; still others, one of the prophets” (vv. 13-14).

Although Jesus was very different from any of these, people made comparisons. Like John, Jesus called for repentance because the Kingdom was at hand. Like Elijah, his ministry was accompanied with miracles. Jeremiah is sometimes called the “weeping prophet” – Jesus' ministry was marked by compassionate love.

“But what about you? Who do you say I am?” “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vv. 15-16).

“Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah” – anointed one. Kings and priests were anointed to set them apart for their important God-given roles. In later Judaism, the Jews were looking for the promised “king like David”. In a unique sense he would be the Lord's anointed – **the Messiah**.

Peter goes a step further – “the Son of the living God”. We cannot be sure how much of Jesus' divinity Peter understood by this phrase. His words were ahead of his understanding. They were given by divine revelation (v. 17).

### Reflect:

- How do ordinary Australians understand the identity of Jesus? Who is he?
- “But what about you?” Who is Jesus for us?

## The Way of Suffering

### Read: Matthew 16.21-28.

“From that time...” The very point at which Peter had made his bold and clear declaration became the occasion for teaching the 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” (v. 21).

The term “Messiah” had become very “loaded” – with strong political and nationalist overtones. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, but his mission was very different from popular expectations. This would be one factor leading to his suffering and rejection – he just wasn't shaping up as the Messiah they wanted. And his presence and ministry was a direct challenge to the authority of the “elders, chief priests and teachers of the law”.