I was talking just the other day to a friend
about my relationship with stuff.
Things. Objects. Acquisitions.
I am not a big accumulator of things
(at least not by Western standards).
I tend to be more interested in
experiences than objects.

However, of the course of my life
there have been a few times
when I have been stopped short
by the beauty or significance of a thing.

The thing itself becomes an experience.

Many years ago when I was the curate
at the Cathedral, I encountered such a thing.

The Cathedral was hosting an Auckland-wide art competition called *Art in Faith*.

The brief was broad: create a piece of art
that somehow relates to the Christian Faith,
in whatever way the artist, interpreted that faith.

One morning, as I walked through the Cathedral
I was stopped in my tracks by *this* painting.
It is called *A simple faith,* by John Cairney*.*
At first glance it appears to be akin to
an amateur photograph.
The focal point of the piece is so far
down the bottom of the frame as to be cut off.

Under a sky moody with the possibility of rain,
we see the roof line of a very plain church,
on which a banner hangs,
proclaiming the apparently unfinished statement, “Jesus Is”.

Jesus is what? Coming? Alive? Jesus is what?

We don’t know.

Because the next line has disappeared off the canvas
and into the ether.
And because of its intentional unfinishedness,
the viewer is required to engage with it,
to imagine how the statement ends.
The line between viewer and artwork has been blurred.

This morning’s Gospel does a similar thing,
it blurs the line between reader and narrative.
This is done in the form of a question posed by Jesus: But who do **you** say that I am?

Peter has a reputation for being
the first to open his mouth.
Usually in order to put his foot in it.
With uncharacteristic insight, he blurts out
“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

It’s a cracker of an answer.
The **correct** answer, even.

It connects Jesus to the salvation history of Israel,
**and** flags his divinity all the while using
primo religious lingo. Ten theological points.
Though, because we are familiar with the story,
we know that in a few short verses
Peter will demonstrate that he has **no clue**
what Jesus being the Messiah might actually mean.

And though Peter has provided the correct answer, the line between Scripture and reader remains blurred.
Who do **you** say Jesus is?

Our response is the work of a life time.
In all likelihood we will find our way into
different answers as our journey of faith
shifts and changes.

Jesus Is.
A quick glance through any Sunday service sheet
and you’ll see a number of theological statements
about who Jesus Is.
Week by week we say and sing
numerous Christological statements –
often without thinking twice about them.
Some you might warm to,
others you’ll likely bristle against.
They are **all** important, for they are seeking
– within the limits of language –
to articulate something of the identity of
the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

In my former life, I hosted a retreat day
with Sheila Pritchard who
explored understandings of God,
spirituality and prayer.

She invited participants to think back over their own life in ten year blocks and reflect on how they understood God at various times in their life,
and in relation to key events.

She modelled this by quoting a song
from her Sunday School days (and mine)
*Jesus Loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so,
Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong”*

At that age, if asked “Who do you say that Jesus is”
her response might have been:
Jesus is: the strong one who loves me
and to whom I belong.
This statement is as **relational** as Peter’s is **theological**. Might your 8 year old self have said a similar thing?

But meaning changes over time, as faith is tested by life. Our understanding of who Christ is will likely be
different as we mature, encounter grief,
learn new things, expand our horizons
and as our relationship with God deepens.

Sometimes we might walk away from an earlier answer
other times we will incorporated it into a
deeper and differently nuanced answer.

At different times in our life
(and according to our personalities)
our understanding of Christ’s identity might be
framed by the relational lens of the heart,
or the intellectual lens of the head.
We might come to an understanding of faith
because an experience, without having put it
into dialogue with our intellect.

Sometimes the result can be a
sentimental and personal relationship
that does nothing to drive us out to
act justly in the world.

Or – like Peter – we might arrive at
a tidy theological understanding of God and Jesus
and how the world works
by exercising our brain,
but never quite grasp what that means **relationally**. And we risk having a clinical notion of God
with whom we never connect.

And so the challenge is to blur the lines
between heart and head.
To poke around our answers to this question
to try to understand what we mean.

What does “Jesus is the Messiah” actually **mean**?
For me? What does it mean for you?

How does certain language either
trip me up or take me deeper?

Any statement of depth about who Jesus is,
must take both head *and* heart into account,
it will be incomplete without
**both parts** of our being engaged.

So … if you were asked the question:
“Who do you say that Jesus is?”
How might **you** answer?

Jesus is … WHOM?
My hero? Saviour? Friend?
Son of God? Liberator? The Way? Brother?
Shepherd? Prophet?

Jesus Is …

Or perhaps the artist,
in saying so little has said it all: Jesus Is.

Amen.