

Matthew 16.13-20; Romans 12.1-8; Isaiah 51.1-6
8 & 10 a.m. Parish Communion @ St. Andrew's Totteridge
27th August 2017: 11th Sunday after Trinity

Developing a relationship with the Living God - Jesus, Simon Peter & the disciples at Caesarea Philippi

Jesus asks the question *'But who do you say that I am?'* Has anyone ever asked you, 'what do you believe?' – never an easy question to answer. You could talk of how God made the world and everything in it. You could talk about the stories of Jesus, and how God came into the world to help his creation. But it's also important to talk not just of the past, but of the living God with whom we can develop a life-long, loving relationship.

So here we have the exchange at Caesarea Philippi - one of the most critical in the three similar, or 'synoptic' gospels of the N.T. - because of the confession that Simon Peter makes about Jesus, and because it points up differences between the three gospels and their separate writers understanding.

In the passage Jesus asks his disciples a very particular question: *'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'* In the Aramaic of NT times, it seems that the phrase 'Son of Man' could be used almost as a paraphrase for 'I'. (Hey Man 60's) In using the term, Jesus could be trying to stress his humble humanity – he's not just an unattainable, kingly, divine being - he's here and now, someone we could get to know.

The question raises a further question - which 'Son of Man' is Jesus talking about? Given the disciples response, which includes a list of some worthy and venerable holy men who may have somehow come back to life, like John the Baptist, Jeremiah, and Elijah, and their undoubted respect for Jesus, the assumption is made that Jesus is talking about himself. Incidentally, The first time in Matthew that Jesus uses the term 'Son of Man' is at 8:20, the *'Foxes have holes...'* response. It's used much earlier in Mark, at 2:10, where Jesus speaks of the authority given to the 'Son of Man' for the forgiveness of sins when he heals the paralytic – this underscores the modern view that the gospels shouldn't be ordered Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, but Mark, Matthew Luke & John.

So Jesus asks another very particular question, this time directed firmly at the disciples: *'But who do you say that I am?'* The prophetic associations with John the Baptist, with Elijah or Jeremiah are all well and good, but it's as though he's trying to stress the need for a personal relationship with God – *'But who do you say that I am?'*

And Simon Peter answers: *'You are the Messiah,* (which means 'anointed one', like a king, the same meaning as 'Christ') *the Son of the living God.'* – a title that is confirmed again at the Transfiguration (17:4). We might use the term 'appointed one' today – appointed by God. In saying this, Peter has acknowledged Jesus as the helper and deliverer, the Saviour, the long-awaited, long-expected, holy one who has come to save. But, if this is so, then why do we need saving, and who do we need saving from, and how can we be saved? (Any answers from congregation?)

Q. How do you know these things? In a passage that is *not* present in Mark or Luke, Jesus then calls Peter blessed, because he has not been told this by anyone, he has discerned it by the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Some think that Mt. here demonstrates himself to be a fan of Peter, perhaps one of his post-Ascension followers. In John, the nearest equivalent of this is at 6:67-71, where the talk is less about a Son of the Living God, but about Jesus having *'the words of eternal life'* and his being *'the Holy One of God.'*

Jesus then re-names Simon-Peter as plain Peter, from the Greek word for stone, *petros*, or the rock on which the church is founded. Perhaps he's thinking of Isaiah 51.1-2, where Abraham, like Peter, is a rock. This is in line with scriptural precedents where, whenever significant spiritual progress is made by an individual, whether it's Abram becoming Abraham (meaning *'father of a multitude'* - Gen.17:1-8), or Jacob becoming Israel (meaning *'he who perseveres with God'* - Gen.32.22-32)... then a change of name is appropriate as part of the rite of passage.

(The rest of the gospel, which does occur in all three versions, may be evidence of both Mt's and Luke's reliance on Mark, and his themes of secrecy & suffering. And further on still, to just beyond our lectionary reading today, we should remember that the very next thing Jesus says to Peter, after Peter suggests that Jesus should not take the path he is set on, is, *'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

The message is that we all need to be saved daily from the temptations that surround us – not just from sweets or cake, or drinks, although it is these things too. It's also about our tendency to want to keep things as they are and for ourselves, to dislike change, to be lazy, thoughtless, selfish and occasionally even cruel. And if we know we can do things like this, then it is also about the temptation to think only badly of ourselves. And if we can be like this, then surely everyone else is just as bad and they shouldn't be trusted either. It can be a vicious, self-perpetuating circle of fear, mistrust and self-loathing.

Whatever we get wrong, these things are not a summation of who we are. We are each children of God, we carry the divine spark of life and love, and we are all loved by God. All we have to do, thanks to Jesus, is turn to him, ask for help, ask for forgiveness, really try to do better, and we are saved. It would only be *after* the crucifixion and resurrection that the disciples would see the deeper implications of their leader being the Christ. We have no such excuse – we have the benefit of hindsight.

The Kingdom of God is within us (Luke 17.21). It's important that we recognise and acknowledge this saving presence every single day - and that the Lord Jesus, the incarnation of God our Creator, is that Saviour, sent to us in God's ultimate pastoral mission to his people. In allowing ourselves his constant presence, we find a growing & transformational relationship with the divine.
Amen.

Mt 16. 13-20 Peter's Declaration about Jesus

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' 14 And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 15 He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' 16 Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' 17 And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Romans 12.1-8 The New Life in Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 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.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy,

in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Isaiah 51.1-6 Blessings in Store for God's People

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. 2 Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. 3 For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

4 Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. 5 I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be for ever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

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