

Sermon for Sunday 27 August 2023

Trinity 12 – Year A – Exodus 1: 8 – 2: 10; Romans 12: 1 – 8; Matthew 16: 13 – 20

Who do you say that I am?

I wonder if you caught the moment last week during the World Athletic Championships when a very important question was asked? One of the athletes who had competed earlier in the men's walking race, proposed to another athlete as she crossed the line at the end of the women's walking race. There are some questions that have life-changing consequences – and a proposal of marriage is certainly one of those. There's a question of the same order in our Gospel reading today as Jesus asks the disciples 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:15).

Jesus has been drawing the crowds. He's becoming well-known as a teacher, a healer and a miracle-worker, although he has not been welcomed in his home town of Nazareth. He's also been drawing opposition from some of the synagogue elders, Pharisees, scribes and

Sadducees. The people who regard themselves as keepers of the faith. Now Jesus is having a conversation with his disciples about what people are saying about him. We can perhaps imagine the moment when he turns to look directly at His disciples. 'But who do you say that I am?'

Was there a silence – short or long? Or did Peter jump straight in with his answer in his usual impetuous way? 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God'.

Just for once, Peter has got it right. His time spent alongside Jesus, all that he has heard and witnessed, has led to this conclusion. But Peter has had help. As Jesus explains, only God the Father could have revealed this to Peter. Faith is a gift from God, not something that we work ourselves into by our own efforts. So Peter has been blessed by God in his understanding of who Jesus is. It is not yet a complete understanding. Far from it. Nor could it possibly be so at this point in Jesus' life. A few verses on – just after

our reading - we see Peter protesting as Jesus begins to talk about His suffering and death.

So, what did Peter mean by his declaration?

For hundreds of years, the Jews had been expecting and hoping for a Messiah. God's chosen leader. Someone who would save His people as Moses had done generations before when He led them out of Egypt. Someone in the royal line of the great King David. Someone who would herald a new golden age for God's people. And now, someone who would rescue them from the Roman occupation. Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. It took the Christian church many years after Jesus' death and resurrection to think through what that statement means.

Peter declares his faith in Jesus, and he is given a commission – a task to do for Jesus. And Jesus makes a joke! Did you know that Jesus liked puns? The name Peter in Greek or Cephas in Aramaic, which was the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke – means 'stone' or 'rock'. So Peter – the impetuous, fallible Peter, who so

often gets it wrong - will be the 'rock' on which the church is built – and will be given the authority to do this. No pun is ever funny when you explain it!

Who do you say that I am?

It's a question that we all face about Jesus. And our answers – if we take them seriously - will also have life-changing consequences. Some of us may be able to remember clearly the moment when we answered that question for ourselves, and the difference it made to our lives. For others there may not have been one decisive moment, but a slowly growing understanding which brought us to where we are now in our faith in Jesus as Lord. Peter had a great deal more to learn, even after he made his declaration about Jesus. Whatever stage we're at it's good to go on exploring our faith.

A good place to start is by reading through Mark's Gospel – it's the shortest one. And as you read, ask God to show you who Jesus is. I've also just got hold of a selection of very short books designed to answer some of the questions people

often ask. Questions such as ‘How do I pray?, ‘Why does God allow suffering?’, ‘Who was Jesus?’. I’m going to leave them at the back of church. Anyone is welcome to borrow them. If you like doing things with other people, you could join one of our study and fellowship groups. We meet on Tuesday afternoons, Tuesday evenings and on Thursday evenings on Zoom. Ask me, if you don’ know about them. And above all, remember to pray – keep on asking God to reveal Jesus to you, as He did to Peter.

When Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah and Lord, Jesus gave him a commission. As our reading from Romans reminds us, we too have a part to play in the church, the body of Christ. We all have unique gifts and abilities that we can use to serve Jesus. In the prayer at the end of our service today we shall say “we offer you our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice.” Do we really mean this? We are sent out to live for the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

So let’s do that!

Amen

Revd Diana Young