

MATTHEW 16: 13-20. Who do you say that I am?

24th August 2014. CCO and StJN.

Father, send your Holy Spirit upon us, that we may hear your word for us today. Amen.

Over recent weeks, John has been showing us how Matthew in his gospel is trying to make clear to the Jewish people of his day who Jesus really is. You may have noticed there has been a gentle crescendo. When Jesus walked on the water and calmed the sea, the disciples declared 'You are the Son of God'. Then last week we heard about the Canaanite woman: she called out to Jesus as the 'Son of David', which was one way of referring to the Messiah. It's interesting to remember here that the disciples were embarrassed by her and wanted Jesus to send her away. Here was a foreigner, and a woman, calling Jesus by the most holy title – what did she know?

In today's reading, we come to a great climax, and it is a key moment in the whole gospel, a pivotal point in the life of Jesus here on earth. Try to imagine the scene: Jesus has been teaching and preaching and working among the people for some time; he has upset a lot of folk, and he knows his life is at risk. He turns and asks his disciples what people are saying about him, who they think he is. And the answers come: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. And then it comes, THE QUESTION; the most important question there can be: But you, who do *you* say that I am?

Not surprisingly, it's our friend Peter who comes out with the answer: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!' That's it! It's been said at last! Try and put yourself in Jesus' shoes: all this time, you have been with your disciples, talking to them about God and the Kingdom; they have seen the amazing things you have said

and done. Have they understood? So often Jesus seems to despair of the disciples – they just don't get it. But here, at last, is Peter, declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Can you imagine the joy and relief Jesus must have felt at that moment? Finally, someone has got it! Result! Now Jesus knows that his ministry has succeeded; now he knows that he can turn and head towards Jerusalem. He knows he can expect trouble there from the religious authorities, but now the breakthrough has happened: there is at least one person who will carry on his work: Peter, the rock, the first of the living stones who will be built up, one upon the other, into the church, the ongoing Body of Christ on earth.

It's interesting to note here what Jesus actually says to Peter: 'Good for you, Simon, son of John, for this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven.' That's how it always is. When we finally come to know who Jesus is, it is always God's gift. We can't sit down and work it all out for ourselves; we can't come up with the formula out of our own heads that will give us the answer; we can't reason and think ourselves into the Kingdom of God. And that's neat, because it means that we don't have to be clever to know God, we just have to be open. If it were not so, Christianity would be like some exclusive club, instead of open to all.

The other weekend we visited my cousin and her family; the husband has been an atheist for years and we've had some lively discussions over the decades, but this time things were a little different: he said to me: 'What I'm looking for is the incontrovertible argument for God, and no-one seems to be able to give it to me.' He is looking for someone to prove to him beyond doubt the truth about God, the truth about who Jesus is. And that won't ever happen. God gives us all the clues we need, but we have to be open to receive them.

Just think how many times in the gospels Jesus says 'Let those who have ears, hear', and how many of the miracles involve people having their eyes or ears 'opened'. Remember the disciples on the road to Emmaus, on Easter Day: Luke tells us that their 'eyes were opened' as Jesus broke bread. Either you see it, or you don't. It is God who opens our eyes and minds so that we perceive and understand. Like Peter, we then 'get it.' Something clicks into place, things make sense, you can see it, and life can never be the same.

That is the message of our passage from Romans: be transformed by the complete renewing of your mind. God wants to change us so that we 'see' more and more; he will change the way we see things. There are some issues on which I simply cannot agree with my cousin's husband, because we are looking at them through totally different lenses, if you like. He can't see things my way, and I can't see them his way, because we are not looking at the world through the same lens. I am aware that my views have changed over the years, and I thank God for that. We're supposed to be being changed, transformed. We're not supposed to stand still. One of the ancient Church Fathers said that the only sin was not to grow.

Now, most of us here will give mental assent to Jesus as being the Messiah, son of the living God. We say it together, we sing it in our worship. But what if we try to imagine ourselves in Peter's shoes, if we try to imagine ourselves face to face with Jesus when he looks us in the eye and says, 'And you, who do you say that I am?' It's a good thing to do at home, if you can have a time of quiet: let Jesus ask you the question, Who do you say that I am? Be totally honest with yourself, and with Him.

And if you come up with the answer, You, Lord Jesus, are the Messiah, the son of the living God, what does that mean for your life today? For Peter, it meant really sticking his neck out and preparing for trouble. He knew what some people thought about

Jesus, he knew he would be running into trouble with the Jewish leaders as well as the political rulers. What did that term Messiah mean for Peter? Everything he'd been waiting and hoping for? The promise of hope and deliverance? The one he would obey, the one to whom he would submit his will, his whole life?

And what about you? What does that term 'Messiah,' or Christ, mean to you? If you accept that Jesus is the Christ, what does that mean for your life today, and tomorrow and the next day? Who do you say that I am? This question goes to the heart of our relationship with God; it goes to the heart of our understanding of ourselves; it goes to the heart of how we lead our lives; to the heart of the relationships we have amongst ourselves and to the heart of the very motives which drive our lives and our decisions.

We need to keep asking ourselves this question, because it is all too easy to just say the words, agree they are true, but not really let them penetrate our soul. We can become too familiar with them. Christ is NOT Jesus' surname: when we call Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, we are acknowledging his cosmic power, his presence throughout the universe and beyond. Jesus the human we know and love; Jesus the Christ has moved beyond our human limitations, he is Lord of all. He is the high point of all creation, the goal of evolution. He is entitled to our absolute surrender, our total obedience, our wholehearted worship. Is that what we give him? He promises us his life, his risen life, here and now. Do we live in that power? If Jesus is the Christ, then nothing and no-one is beyond the reach of his love; there is no situation that cannot be touched by his healing hand.

Listen to Jesus asking you: Who do you say that I am? And if you, individually and personally, reply to Jesus, "you are the Christ," he says to you "You, too, are like Peter, the rock, and with you, too, a living stone, I am building my church." What happened to Peter continues, here, today, and it includes us. Amen.