

SUNDAY 27 AUGUST 2023

12th Sunday after Trinity

Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

Who do YOU say that I am ? That is the question Jesus puts to his own disciples, after asking them what other people are saying. Who do YOU say that I am ? It's an extremely leading question. And when Jesus Christ himself is asking it, you need to be pretty careful about how you answer it. Suppose I asked you "who do you think Jesus Christ was or rather is ?" How would you reply ? Well, you might say the same as Peter did, although the word he used – Messiah - had more to do with what the Jews had been expecting for centuries before Jesus was born, encouraged by prophets like Isaiah and Daniel. However, what he said was fairly remarkable because he did not have the benefit of hindsight as we do. So in response to the same question, we would probably say "Jesus Christ is the Son of God", and if you have had a bit of theological training you might add "the second person of the Trinity", the other two being God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

This is not just an academic exercise. It matters a great deal how we respond when other people, who may or may not be Christians, want to know from us who Jesus Christ is and why we believe in him. Otherwise, why are we all gathered here today ?

Before we try and answer that question for ourselves, let's look at the Gospel passage we have just heard read. In the commentaries about it there is some speculation that in answering Jesus's question "Who do you say that I am ?" with the reply "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God", Peter is enthusiastically and loyally supporting his leader while perhaps not fully realising the real meaning behind Jesus's existence on

earth; and as I said a moment ago, Peter and the other disciples could not yet realise that full meaning, in the way we can. In fact in Mark's Gospel it is recorded that Peter only said "You are the Messiah".

This understandable inability to realise the full meaning of Jesus is surely the reason why he then begins to teach his disciples that he would have to undergo great suffering and death – and after three days rise again. Peter, ever impetuous, takes exception to this idea and is sternly reprimanded by Jesus, who tells him that he is seeing things in purely human terms rather than divine ones. He goes on to explain what this means: to follow Jesus is to deny oneself, in other words to put the interests of others above our own. The words are stark – saving rather than losing our life for the sake of others makes it look as though it is a question of physical life or death. In extreme circumstances that may happen, but mainly it is a question of doing something for the common good – like being a volunteer for a charity during the recent lockdown, or working with young people or with the elderly, or working as a Town Pastor, as some people here are doing. That's about loving our neighbour as ourselves, not neglecting ourselves but finding ourselves in loving service for others. Otherwise we run the risk of being among those who are ashamed of Jesus and his words, with the result that Jesus will also be ashamed of us when our time comes. Incidentally, some atheists like Richard Dawkins would probably be ashamed of us as well: a little theory of mine is that he wrote "The God Delusion" and other books because deep down he is envious of Christian faith and is curious to know more. But he finds that people claiming to be Christians are too often uncertain of their faith and don't know the basic tenets of it. He is goading us to be more sure.

There is more than loving our neighbour as to why we should follow Jesus, and this is what the disciples could not yet know. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, which they are being told about in today's Gospel and simply cannot understand, lead to the promise of forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life; God in Jesus has shared our suffering and continues to share it. This is the reason why we should love God, and as God created us all in his own loving image, so we seek to love our neighbour as ourselves.

But all Christians are at different stages of faith and recognition of who Jesus is and what following him means. Some only discover it in later life, and others think they know what it is all about, because it has somehow always been with them. But we can all grow in faith, it's never too late. It can be helpful to have a meaningful, personal conversation with someone about faith. In this way we can try and find those places in our lives where we know who and what we are, how we know ourselves to be loved by God, how we are serving others, and how our faith positively matters as we go about our daily lives. Like our inspirational volunteers, we can grow more and more in the confidence and self-belief that comes from truly knowing who God is, who Jesus is, and the special role he wants each of us to play.

And this is the exciting prospect in store for children, whose parents bring them to church to be baptised, to join the Christian community worldwide, and St Mary's has seen several infant baptisms this year. Our personal conversations with small children about faith in any case have to wait a few years, but in the meantime their parents and godparents make promises on their behalf. Of course it is perfectly possible for adults to be baptised, in a service which combines both baptism and confirmation, rather like in the Early Church. If you or someone you know has not been

baptised and would like to explore further please speak to Fr Nigel or in his absence to me. So Christian communities gathered everywhere will pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come down on these new Christians, so that in time they may make their own Christian commitment in declaring who they say Jesus is and how faith in him will affect their lives.

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