

St Mary's, Woodbridge – 30th June 2024

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Trust, it would seem, is currently a scarce commodity. Opinion pollsters and the foot-soldiers knocking on doors for the political parties at the moment report the same phenomenon. Trust in our leaders to understand us or to have answers to the great challenges of our lives is at an all-time low. Distrustfulness spreads, we are told, like a virus – it infects our attitudes to politics but also to the media, the police and almost every national institution which carries symbolic or real authority in our national life – the Church, the Crown, Parliament and so on.

It has been said, “that a lie can travel half way around the world while trust is putting on its shoes”, and in the light of some of the recent political debates that would seem to be true.

So the Gospel account of Jesus' conversation with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi gives us a picture of a group of people who had every reason to be distrustful. Their traditional authorities, the Scribes and the Pharisees, appeared to have their own positions and authority at heart rather than the interests of their people or the common good. The occupying power of Rome was intent on subduing any hint of self-determination in first century Israel. This group of men who had followed Jesus unquestioningly, had seen the effects of his ministry on the sick and the excluded, who had heard his parables explaining a worldview in which power came from the edges and not from the centre, were now being invited to take a new step into the unknown. Jesus is leading them on a path which will cost him (and eventually them), everything – even life itself.

So the moment of truth is bound to arrive. “Who do you say that I am?” This moment cannot be postponed – any fudging or avoidance will lead to disaster eventually and to the fracture of the community and the collapse of the project under pressure. It is a moment when the commitment required is intensified and the risks are clarified.

The genius of Peter is that he can make an act of trust at that moment. He can see beyond John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah – all of them pointing to God's reign on earth – but Peter can see that reign is embodied in Jesus. He can see that he is in the presence of “the Christ”.

But like nearly all geniuses, Peter turns out to be deeply flawed. He is given the keys of the Kingdom, and the authority to become the foundation of the new community around Jesus. Yet he will still betray Jesus under the gathering clouds of execution.

So there comes a moment, once again, after the resurrection, when Peter's trust is challenged and tested by Jesus. By the lakeside, the risen Christ asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?”. This is the moment when the goal of the whole Gospel is expressed. Jesus takes the initiative with Peter in that moment and offers him a fresh start. Once again, Peter's trust is tested – dare I trust that I am forgiven and always will be however many times I fail?

The feast of St Peter which the Church celebrates today is perhaps the right moment for the people of St Mary's to be embarking on the next chapter of the long story of this church and its ministry at the heart of Woodbridge. Many years ago I was privileged to be part of that story at the time when St Mary's House was refurbished. Now you are making your own act of trust in moving forward to the next phase – making the West end of this church more accessible and developing the range of facilities at St Mary's House for the benefit of the whole town.

But Pentecost is a reminder of the way this trust will be tested too. Of course there will be the hard work of fundraising and discussions about plans and designs. Of course there will be times when you wonder whether everyone has caught the vision or whether the time will ever come when the work is completed.

But my hope would be that something more profound and significant will be tested in you by this new step. It is of course the question with which Jesus tests Peter: "Do you love me?"

At the heart of every Christian community that question needs to be asked. Are we growing in love for one another and for God? In the Gospel that love is never taken for granted. Jesus invites it, desires it and prays for it: but all through he never takes it for granted that his love will be returned. There is acute awareness that the disciples may not understand or respond. The phrase recurs: "If you love me...." And, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love."

Professor David Ford has written: "The whole Gospel can be read as an appeal to readers to make this response of trust and love." That surely must lie close to your motivation to take this step of trust at this point in your history. You do so not primarily to improve the comfort or even the beauty of this church. Not primarily to increase the congregation or the income of this church. Not primarily to leave a legacy of achievement to the next generation. All of these are worthy motives but they are secondary. The primary challenge is to reach out in love so that relationships with one another, with the wider community and with God can become more Christ-like.

If I may be personal for a moment, it seems to me that this is part of a much larger challenge to the whole Church of God. It is now nearly thirty years since I became a bishop. In that time, through some personal sadness and loss, I have known communities which instinctively understood how to respond because they have learned (sometimes very painfully) what the challenge of love really means. But I have known others communities (and indeed some of the central structures of the Church) which seem more preoccupied with their own self-protection, or preservation, or reputation.

The Gospel puts the question constantly to all of us: "Who do you say that I am?" Today, here at St Mary's you have the chance to show that you know what is meant by the reply: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."