

August 23rd 2020 for 11th Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

**Gospel Reading** Matthew 16:13 - 20

May the words that I speak be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Over the centuries countless people have asked the question “who is Jesus?” Very few people, including many of the well-known atheists of our time, would argue that Jesus didn't exist. As an historical figure there is more evidence to suggest that Jesus existed than say Julius Caesar, or Alexandra the Great, or Cleopatra or any other comparable figure from that period of history.

So not bad for a carpenter's son from a rustic village in Palestine. Palestine in those days being an impoverished, occupied country on the edge of the Roman Empire. As I say very few people would argue that Jesus actually existed. But when it comes to who he actually claimed to be, it is a completely different ball game. Some of course have argued that Jesus was simply a good moral teacher or an itinerant preacher. And like many eloquent preachers and story-tellers of the time had attracted a following and caused a bit of stir amongst the establishment, and was eventually put to death on a cross, this particularly brutal form of execution specifically designed to deter others from stirring up trouble and causing rebellion. But far from being deterred the followers of Jesus went on to claim that their leader who had died on the cross and had been buried, rose again and had appeared to them in a resurrected body. They claim that God himself had raised Jesus from the dead, and in doing so had vindicated everything that Jesus had said about himself. Namely that he was the Messiah, the chosen one of God, he was the Son of God, God incarnate. And ultimately we have to decide for ourselves who Jesus is.

C.S. Lewis, the great writer and Christian apologetic, challenged us by arguing that Jesus is either who he says he is, or he is not. If he is not who he says he is, then he is at best a liar, a fraudster, or a deluded mad-man. But if he is who he claims to be, well that is a whole different ball game.

In a way this sets the scene for our Gospel reading for this evening. No doubt people were already asking the question as Jesus asked his followers, the disciples ‘who do people say I am?’ After all he had caused quite a stir, with his preaching and teaching, and the miracles that he had performed. We are told that large crowds had followed him. Indeed early on in his Galilean ministry he turned up in his home town of Nazareth, and he entered the synagogue, that place of public meeting and worship. And on the Sabbath day he had stood up and read from the sacred scroll which had the words of the Prophet Isaiah, and he had read the passage which said ‘the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’ Those who witnessed this event were amazed and asked the question ‘who is this man, isn't he the carpenter's son?’ There were many who were amazed but

many also rejected him out of hand. So Jesus continued to go around the towns and villages where he would preach a message of good news about the coming of God's kingdom. And he demonstrated the reality of this message with all sorts of miracles; healing miracles, signs and wonders, that must have impacted on those who heard with their own ears and saw with their own eyes. And they must have wondered 'who is this profound teacher?' 'Who is this miracle worker?' 'He must be of God.' There were those who were hungry to know more and to see more, and they would follow Jesus where ever he went, hopeful and expectant. They were often the poor, the marginalised, those who struggled to exist in this impoverished country where the elite, the rich, and the powerful would exploit those struggling to eek out an existence. No wonder they were interested to learn more of this message of hope and justice, eager to learn how God really did love them and offered forgiveness and a new life.

But not everybody embraced what Jesus had to say. There were also those who rejected his message. And they were often the rich, and the powerful and the religious leaders who often enjoyed privileges at others expenses. They didn't like what Jesus was doing. They could see that if his followers grew in number and this movement gathered momentum, there could be civil unrest and furthermore it would be a direct challenge to their power and wealth and privileges. This is the context in which our Gospel reading is set.

Caesarea Philippi is located in the most beautiful part of Northern Israel, in the foothills of Mount Hermon. Its near the source of the River Jordan. The River Jordan, you might argue is life-giving as it flows down the entire length of the country, providing a much needed fresh water supply in this hot, dry, arid country.

Before the Roman occupation Caesarea Philippi was known as Paneas, which became abbreviated to Baniyas. Here the Greek god Pan was worshipped. Pan was the god of the wild, the god of shepherds and flocks, of nature, of mountain wilds. Pan was the god that was worshipped in open spaces or in caves, rather than in the temple, as was the case of the God of Israel. It is an interesting location for Jesus to be asking his disciples the question, 'who do people say I am?' I can't help reflecting on the choice of location, after all Caesarea Philippi is some distance from the Sea of Galilee, and it is in the opposite direction to where Jesus was heading next, which was of course Jerusalem. I wonder if there is a significance in the choice, and whether it has some bearing on how we understand our mission today to draw more people to Jesus and to proclaim to the world that Jesus really is the Messiah.

In many ways the Greek god Pan is still worshipped today, although perhaps not explicitly. But many people would say that they are simply spiritual, rather than follow a particular religion. And they would believe in some higher force and particularly when they are out in the wilds of nature. Indeed it is true that God reveals himself through nature and all around us we can see God's handiwork in the beauty of creation. Yet as Christians we would say that God's revelation is much more specific. God has spoken to his people through the prophets, and the message of the prophets points to his Son, Jesus. In Jesus, God meets us in our humanity and declares his perfect, unconditional love for each one of us. The cross means many

things to us. It's about sacrifice. It's about bearing our punishment for our sin. Paying the price. Forgiveness. Hope. Resurrection. And so much more. But at the heart of it is the ultimate expression of love. As Jesus says, 'no greater love has man than this; to lay down his life for his friends.'

As Jesus gathers his disciples together at Caesarea Philippi, and asks the question 'who do people say I am?' And whether it's a reflection of what they had seen and heard, or whether it is the combination of many thoughts and experiences. Or whether it's a direct revelation from God, the Holy Spirit speaking into their hearts. Jesus' true identity is revealed. The disciples need to know who Jesus truly is as they prepare to move from Galilee to Jerusalem, and the way of the cross. And in answer to Jesus' question, 'but what about you, who do you say I am?' Peter replies 'you are the Messiah.'

What is your answer?

With revelation comes responsibility. Whether its simply the times Peter spent with Jesus, or the teaching, or the miracles that he witnessed. Peter knew that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. And Jesus says to him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." For it is not yet time for Jesus must die on the cross, and rise again, before the disciples can truly proclaim the good news of Jesus. We are told Simon, the humble fisherman from Galilee, is given a new name, Peter or Cephas, and this means rock. This is reminiscent of Abraham, when God changes his name from Abram to Abraham to represent what would be done through him because of God's promises. His original name Abram means 'exalted father' in Hebrew. His new name Abraham means 'father of a multitude'. Indeed Abraham became a father of a great nation. And in many ways the change of name from Simon to Peter is no less significant. The name Simon means 'hearer' or 'the one who hears God'. Simon Peter hears Jesus call, to follow and obey. But now he is to be called Peter, the rock on which Jesus will build his church. You may recall one of Jesus' parables where the foolish man builds his house on sand, but the wise man builds his house on a rock, a solid foundation. Peter was chosen because he had insight and revelation, and placed his trust and faith in Jesus. Yes, the other disciples will play their part, but Peter is singled out as the one who will be instrumental in building the church. Peter will go on to assume an important leadership role. It is Peter who addresses the crowds on the day of Pentecost, and so was the first to publicly proclaim the resurrection, that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Indeed so much had happened since Jesus had asked Peter, "who do you say I am?" at Caesarea Philippi. From there Jesus and the disciples had gone to Jerusalem. There had been so much frantic activity, the triumphant entry into the

Holy City, the teaching in the temple forecourt, the Last Supper, Jesus being betrayed, being handed over to the authorities, arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. Peter, the one who Jesus chose to build the church, denies Jesus three times. Peter is by no means perfect. But Peter is the sort of man Jesus makes his church of. Often Peter proves himself as a natural leader among the group of disciples. He is not afraid to have a go, even at times he may fail. He promises great loyalty and yet at critical times he can fall asleep, as he did in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then as I say denied Jesus three times. At yet by the grace of God, he perseveres, he is forgiven, he is re-instated, even when he makes mistakes Jesus does not stop believing in him, trusting him. And Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Peter is given a position of such great responsibility and God is able to use him.

So that what Jesus fulfilled in the prophet Isaiah continues to be fulfilled in Peter and in the church today, to proclaim good news to the poor. 'He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Peter is not perfect, but Jesus can see his potential. A mixture of inspiration and yet self-interest, of insight and yet ignorance, of rock and yet sand. Sometimes with flashes of inspiration, sometimes with the very devil in him. He is so reluctant to change his ideas, and still has so much to learn. He can make great promises of loyalty but also can fall asleep and deny his Lord. But he is capable of great courage and commitment. And so are you and I. Perhaps more than we dare to believe. You may not have been given a new name like Peter, but your name is known by God. You are known by God, and God has entrusted you with building his church. Your kindness, your love, your resolve to be the best version of yourself. Your friendship, your gifts, your prayers, your determination, your faith. What you do matters. You are a piece of the jigsaw and without that the picture is not complete. You have a responsibility, you too are key to the church, you have a unique part to play. So let's pray

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you took Peter to a place of beauty and stillness and there he sees that you truly are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. As we too see you as the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, give us the courage and the resolve to play our part in building your church, and establishing your kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.