

Sermon 23 August 2020, 11th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 16)

Reverend Irene

Matthew 16: 13-20

We are midway through St Matthews's gospel, in which Jesus has been encouraging the disciples by use of parables, miracles and healing to point people to God, but also to give them the confidence to continue this teaching in his absence.

Reading the gospel in preparation for this sermon took me back to school.

You remember, you've had a period of teaching and tried to absorb what's been said, when all of a sudden, the lecturer pointedly asks a question to see if you've been paying attention and understood the teaching.

After all his teaching, the questions Jesus asks this morning could be seen in that light.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

"But who do **you** say that I am?"

We know the answers, we've grown up with the questions and just heard the answers again. In asking the first question, Jesus is telling the disciples to watch for signs of spiritual growth in the people. They haven't quite got it yet because some say Elijah, some say John the Baptist, or one of the prophets.

But the second question is directed at the disciples:

"Who do you say that I am?"

Of all the apostles, it's impulsive Peter who gets it right,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God". Alleluia for Peter!

As disciples of Christ and encouragers of others to come to faith, we too know the answer to the questions. But here's the rub. This gospel story is not about giving the right answer to Jesus' question, it's not a test!

It's not about the **words** you've just heard in the gospel, it's about what is in your heart. It's why you made the effort to come to church this morning instead of having breakfast in bed, it's about the core of your Christian faith and living with Jesus at the centre of your lives.

Each one of us is an individual made in the likeness of God, our lives have similarities yet we are all different, but we each have a centre to our lives. In most cases, it's our families.

It could be our work, our homes, our holidays, our beliefs or even our prejudices; the choices are endless. Perhaps this year, the year of a global pandemic, will change what we feel is the centre of our lives. We've had to learn new ways of doing things and dealing with difficult situations. Some will have coped better than others, especially if our livelihood or health haven't been threatened. Some will have embraced isolation as a sabbatical, whereas others may have found the whole experience intolerable.

But whatever it has meant to you, it's pretty certain it will have made you think about what is important in life.

If I asked you that question directly, I guarantee the top answer would be family, naturally, it's the same for me, but I also know how highly God figures in my list of priorities.

This is the crux of the question Jesus asks the disciples.

“Who do you say that I am?”

So is “God” something you do on a Sunday?

Is God an ever present being in your life and your soul?

Only you can answer those questions.

Paul tells us in our first reading that our journey through faith should be one of **not** conforming to the pattern of this world, but using the time to really get to know Jesus as we listen to the words of the gospel and learn about his life, his death and his resurrection. The Jesus we learn about as a child should be different from the Jesus we know about today, not that he has changed, but that we are transformed by knowing him and having a deeper relationship with him. Jesus encourages us to delve deeply into the scriptures and into ourselves to find out what our lives are actually centred on. Being baptised and having the label Christian is not enough, we are called into a relationship with God through Jesus, to live our faith through our families and our friendships but also through our work on earth. Our aim is to live with Christ at the centre of our lives, and to do everything in a Christ-like way, not just for those we love. Care for the hungry, defend the oppressed, forgive our enemies even in fear, pray for others, not just ourselves, even when were too tired to pray, to practice generosity in a declining economy and think beyond your personal bubble. Not easy is it?

Being a Christian is not easy, because it's not a passive exercise; it means asking questions and becoming involved in the wrongs of the world and trying to put them right. When we do this fully and unselfishly, we realise our lives really are centred on God, and then, like Peter, we become the rocks on which Jesus builds his church.

“Who do you say that I am?” If you truly believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, you must live with love like Jesus and proclaim what you believe to all those with whom you come into contact.

Nothing more, nothing less. Amen.