

Sermon on Sunday 23rd August 2020 on Zoom

If we could see Jesus standing here before us, a man of flesh and blood, and he asked us, "Who do you say I am?" What answer would we give? Who is he to you? Here he is among us. Do we see him our Saviour and our Lord? Is he the meaning of all we live for?

Many years ago, a friend of mine walked out of the Baptist Chapel that we attended for Sunday worship after a particularly rousing service and bumped into a man who was standing in the middle of the doorway. He was gazing at the cross perched on top of the roof. She excused herself and began to walk away, but the man called her back. "Tell me," he said, pointing through the front doors into the church, that she had belonged to most of her life, "What is it that you believe in there?" She started to answer him and then realised that she did not know how to put it into words, and as she stood there trying to compose something the man said, "Never mind. I am sorry if I bothered you." and walked away.

He did bother her, and her story bothered me as I tried to decide what I would have answered in her place. Why do I go to church, and what is it I believe in there? The Nicene creed? That is not the sort of answer I would want to recite to families requesting baptism for their children. Maybe I could tell them that Jesus is my Lord but what would that mean to them? For in spite of all the dreadful rioting, wars, starving children, pandemics, climate change, the world is in God's hands, says who, so is that what we believe?

In this morning's Gospel it is Jesus himself who is asking the question about faith and what it all means. He and his disciples have just come to Caesarea Philippi having performed many miracles: the feeding of the five thousand, the calming of the storm and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter but Jesus has not only been healing, he has been teaching as well, lessons about obedience to the law and about the signs of the times.

Every now and again Jesus quizzes his disciples to see how much they are taking in, to see how well they have understood him, and he does not hide his displeasure at their consistently low scores. In the verses just before the ones we are looking at today Jesus warns against the ideals of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Small wonder then, that they are a little anxious when Jesus asks them an entirely different question, this time not about what he has said but who he is. "Who do men say I am?" he asks them, they are relieved, because it is a question that they have some answers to. "John the Baptist" one of them answers, while others say, "Elijah" "Jeremiah" suggests another, or one of the prophets, "But who do you say I am?" Simon answered, "You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"You are Peter," Jesus says, giving Simon a new name, and on this rock I will build my church, but a little later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will stub his toe on the "rock" that is Peter, when Peter begins to argue with Jesus about what will happen in Jerusalem. "Get behind me, Satan," says Jesus. Peter goes from being blessed to being satanic, from being the cornerstone of the church to the stumbling block in Christ's way. What does it all mean? How can Peter be the rock with the right answer and the devil in the way all at the same time?

Thank goodness for Peter! Right or wrong he is always the first to leave the boat and to follow Jesus. It is hard to say whether he is courageous or just plain reckless, but whatever, this time it seems to be the answer that Jesus wants to hear because he promptly declares Peter the rock on which the church will be built, and the inheritor of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you." Jesus tells him. "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Which is a little like saying. "Blessed are you for an answer that is not strictly your own."

If Peter is the 'rock' of the Church, then what are we supposed to learn from him? It is almost impossible to find a moral lesson from the story of Peter. Why? Because he is impulsive, opinionated, and when push come to shove, he denies that he knows Jesus at all. About all that can be said in his favour is, that he is willing to go first, to say what he means, and every time he gets things wrong is willing to start again. Whilst the other disciples hang back for fear of giving the wrong answer, Peter risks his own answer, which in this instance is God's answer and sweet music to Jesus' ears.

Peter may not exhibit the flawless character, intellect or spiritual depth that we might look for in the founder of our church, personally I am pleased to hear that he is the one in charge of the keys to the gates of heaven because someone like Peter may understand someone like me who finds it easier and safer to repeat other people's answers. If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for us all, because he is one of us, and remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block. He shows us that blessedness is less about being perfect than about willingness to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try and keep on trying whatever the odds.

So, the next time someone asks you what you believe go ahead and give answering a try. You may sound uninspired, but then again you may surprise yourself and say something inspired instead. The important thing is to try not only to say what we believe but its relevance to the way we live. Knowing that we are followers of Jesus and that Peter is the rock of the church of Christ whether we give the right or wrong answer, we too are chips off the old block, pieces of the one true rock against which even the powers of death shall not prevail.