

Sermon – 27th August 2023

One of my favourite sessions when I am preparing people for confirmation is a session when we look at all of the different ways that Jesus might be described; all of the things that he might be called. I wonder what you would come up with. He was a carpenter; a healer; a teacher; a preacher. He was, it seems, a leader – people certainly followed him. The way he most commonly referred to himself was as Son of Man. He was also Son of God; the Messiah, or anointed one. A Christian reading of the Hebrew scriptures considers him to be the suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah; Emmanuel or God with us. In hymns and elsewhere he is described in all kinds of ways: saviour; master; friend; brother. I'm sure that the list could go on and on.

But why does it matter? Perhaps you, like me, were taught that phrase as a child: sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. Except that they do, don't they? Names can hurt us. In a variety of complex ways they can also define us, and indeed shape us and our relationships.

That is one of the things being explored in this morning's gospel reading. And it's worth taking a bit of time to consider it from different perspectives.

In one sense, this is a straightforward story of the disciples' growing awareness of who Jesus is. Each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, pays significant attention to Jesus's identity and the ways that it is revealed. To those who make the connections, and those who fail to see. In this morning's gospel reading, we hear Peter identifying Jesus for the first time as the Messiah. In Mark's gospel, Peter's statement falls right in the middle of the sixteen chapters. For the first eight chapters we discover more and more about who Jesus is. And then at the point that Jesus is identified by Peter as the Messiah, we see the inexorable journey towards all that will take place in Jerusalem as Jesus is betrayed.

In Matthew's gospel there is an added significance to Peter's words. Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience. Identifying Jesus categorically as the Messiah meant that the Jewish search for the Messiah had come to an end. Of course, as we know, it remains a matter of faith whether Jesus is in fact the Messiah, but there were certainly those who were convinced, including Peter and Matthew.

In all three of the synoptic gospels there is agreement that no sooner was Jesus identified as the Messiah than he ordered people not to tell others. I wonder why that was. There's no doubt at all that it is the kind of statement that will create conflict. But conflict was on its way. Jesus is about to predict all that will happen to him. He is under no illusion that he will be able to avoid the course of events leading to his crucifixion.

Perhaps his reasoning was slightly different. Perhaps he didn't want to force the course of events. They needed to play out more naturally. I wonder, too, whether he was aware that recognising himself as Messiah is an act of faith. It's not something that we will be convinced of through argument, but rather is something we come to believe through relationship. Through seeing the lives lived out by those who believe it. Through growing in our own relationship with God through prayer and reflection.

Where Matthew's gospel is unique in narrating this account is in his focus on Peter. Both Mark and Luke tell us that it was Peter who identified Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew goes a step further in setting up a short dialogue between Jesus and Peter. It is an exchange which speaks deeply of Peter's

own identity, so many aspects of which are mentioned. When Jesus calls Peter, he gives him a new name, yet in this passage he recognises that his new name does not mean that he is not still Simon, son of Jonah. The meaning, though, of Jesus's chosen name is given particular significance. The name Peter means rock, and he will be the foundation of the church.

The responsibility handed to Peter is quite simply awesome – in Jesus's words: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Having watched Peter for some time now, we might wonder at Jesus's decision. How can such an impetuous character be handed such responsibility? Surely he will mess up. Perhaps that's an important message for us all, too. Peter will indeed mess up. This is the moment that I should announce a spoiler alert, but we are only moments away from Peter, the rock on whom the church is founded becoming Peter, the stumbling block to Jesus. What this morning's reading reminds us, though, is that part of the gift of life is having significant responsibilities. Even if we don't really feel up to bearing them.

I wonder whether this might be part of the crux of this morning's reading. As I've tried to explain, it's a reading that speaks of identity. Our own identity. And Jesus's identity – and therefore God's. I began by sharing some of the answers that have been given by confirmation candidates when we have discussed Jesus's identity. But what about you? What are the different aspects of your own identity?

There are so many factors that shape our identity. The family into which we were born may be one of them. As a teacher, I remember some of my students explaining the family rivalries on the estates where they lived, and how difficult they found it not to be labelled as a result. For others, living up to the exalted reputation of a "successful" parent can be equally challenging.

For much of our lives we can find ourselves identified by the job that we do – for better or worse. Many of us also have other roles within society that shape our identities, and other relationships, making us variously mother, father, aunt, uncle and the like.

This morning's first reading speaks of the different gifts that each of us is given, making us the unique individuals that we are. Each of these is also an aspect of our identity. It seems to me that there is something important about holding onto the whole of who we are. I think that is part of what we discover in Peter's character. I know times in my own life when I have wanted to think that I am only the parts of myself of which I am the most proud. But that isn't the truth. The truth is the whole of ourselves. And the truth is also the whole complexity of our relationships. Our relationships with one another. And our relationship with God. There is always more to discover. And we do it all in the knowledge that the most important aspect of our identity is as a beloved child of God.

Amen