

Sunday 23rd August 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer

Lord God, in your mercy you revealed yourself to me in Christ,
human reason cannot find divine truth;
only your Holy Spirit can give that gift.

I pray that you would give me ears to hear, a will to accept and a
heart to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 16:13-20

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked
his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and
still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the
living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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Sermon

As Peter came to a higher appreciation of who Jesus was, he had reached a stage where Jesus was now willing to give him deeper insights as to who He was and of His purpose. This is a principle in life in general is it not? For it is only as we learn the simple things that we are able to progress to the more difficult. God understands our limitations and our weaknesses and He so graciously accommodates them and gives us His Holy Spirit to help us to grow in our love and our understanding of Him.

In today's reading Jesus asks His Disciples,
"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

The term, 'Son of Man,' was well known to the Jewish people, for it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures a hundred and seven times, and where in most uses it refers to human beings, in the Book of Daniel it is used in connection to some one other than a mere man.

¹³ 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.' (Chapter 7:13-14)

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It is clear from Jesus' use of the term that He is using it as a Title and may well have had in mind Daniel Chapter 7, where Daniel saw someone who was like a son of man, yet was not greater than a man. Was Daniel given an early vision of the Messiah?

Scholars debate as to whether Jesus uses this term for Himself in reference to his manhood or to His deity. Whatever the debate, it is clear from the Gospel reading that Jesus uses the term with solemnity, and with implication. If Jesus was using the term in reference to His manhood, why did he not simply ask, "Who do people say I am?" And why would Peter go on to refer to Jesus as the Messiah?

In answer to His question the Disciples replied,

"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

King Herod and many others thought that John had been raised from the dead (see Mark Ch6: 14-29) and so many might have mistakenly thought that Jesus was John the Baptist.

As for Elijah, well the last Book in the Old Testament prophesies his return; in Malachi Ch4 verse 5 we read,

'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

It was believed by many Jews, that Elijah, the Old Testament Prophet would return to Herald the arrival of the Messiah who would bring in 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord.'

What of Jeremiah? In the Apocryphal (or as some would have it Deuterocanonical) Book of 2 Maccabees, it is said that just before the Babylonians in 597BC conquered Israel, Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant and the Alter of Incense in a cave somewhere on mount Nebo. The Jews of Jesus's day believed that before the Messiah came, Jeremiah would return and bring with him the Ark of the Covenant and the Alter of Incense.

Others said of Jesus that He was one of the other ancient (Old Testament) prophets.

It was clear to all then that Jesus was not considered your average Rabbi. The majority thought very highly of Him, equating Him with two of the greatest figures in the history of Israel, two figures thought to be heralds of the Messiah.

Now Jesus would have already known what people thought of Him, but what He wanted to know at this point was what His Disciples thought of Him:

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Here is the challenge for us all, it is more important what we, (you), think about Jesus than what others say or think about Him.

“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

The answer to this question is crucial, because it will reflect our relationship with Jesus and our place in His Kingdom

“Who do I say Jesus is?” Now, we must not make the mistake of saying one thing with our lips and believing another with our hearts and minds. In answering this question our answer must be what we believe, because Jesus knows our heart and our thoughts, we cannot fool Him.

No one else will do your believing for you. No one else can have a relationship with Christ on your behalf; you must have your own relationship with Him.

Peter is an amazing character; he is often portrayed as the man who is first in there; first to speak, first to act, and seemingly often without thinking of the consequences. This is probably an over simplification of a passionate and well-intentioned man, but none the less, he is often the first to react.

In the Gospel reading above, Peter is the first among the Disciples to respond to Jesus’ question and he comes out with the most amazing statement. While the general populace were acclaiming Jesus as the forerunner of the Messiah, Peter says, outright,

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

Peter, a Jew, knew the significance of such a statement, for if the Jewish authorities were to have heard him say such a thing, he would be in court on charges of blasphemy and would be facing a death sentence.

The other Disciples appear to have assented to Peter's declaration.

Jesus tells Peter that it was God who gave him this understanding. It is not possible to come to an understanding of who Jesus is by our own powers, such as they are. We cannot discover that Jesus is God by the use of scientific method, nor philosophical reasoning, such knowledge can come to us by revelation alone. It is God's prerogative to reveal Himself to whom He chooses and whatever way He chooses.

Now that the Disciples have a much higher understanding and appreciation of Jesus, He is able to tell them more clearly of things to come and we can read of these things from verse 21 onward.

We see from today's reading that Peter did not come to such a high appreciation of Jesus through his own efforts, but through what God had revealed to Him, and not necessarily all at once, (though God can choose to do this). By allowing Peter to spend time with Jesus, God gradually, in as much as Peter was able, helped him to understand more and more about Him. Having been given the gift of faith, God's Holy Spirit helped Peter to grow in that faith until he could acclaim Jesus as the Messiah the Son of the Living God.

If you have learned that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of the Living God then you are blessed indeed, for, in the words of Jesus, "This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

Now you might have thought that that was it for Peter and the Disciples and there was no more for them to learn, not so, there were many more lessons to come. Having been shown who Jesus was and having realised the truth of it, they had to learn to hold on to this truth, and to do so through difficulties, doubts and danger, indeed some of their highest learning was in such times.

Can we expect things to be very different for us? Can we expect our faith and our relationship with Jesus to grow only in the relative comfort of a cosy classroom? (or church building?). Surely we find out if our faith in and love for Jesus is real when we are exposed to the exigencies of life?

Often, it is when we are facing the hard times that our faith in, our understanding of, and love for Jesus, grow beyond that which we thought possible.

As a missionary once said,

"Out of the winepresses of pain comes forth the soul's best wine."

Amen!

Prayer

Gracious God,
though you are known by many names
and depicted in many ways,
we know you most fully in Jesus Christ,
our Messiah, your Son.

We thank you for forming us
into the church, the body of Christ in the world.

Help us to live as He taught us:

loving you,

loving neighbour,

unified in Christ,

using our varied gifts and skills

in the service of ministry,

until all things are transformed

into what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In Christ's name, we ask it. **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

Here you are invited this week to pray your own prayers of
intercession as the Holy Spirit leads you

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the
church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful
departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service
here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to
pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!