

SERMON – SUNDAY 23 AUGUST 2020 - MATTHEW 16.13-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The geographer in me likes to know where I am. I have the complete set of Ordnance Survey Landranger maps at home, quite lot of the old 1 inch maps, and a completely up to date map app on my phone. When my wife says “where are we?” I can usually answer. On the occasions when I am lost, I can usually cover up the fact. As Mr Scoble, my geography teacher once said, a man is never lost, just slightly confused.

I like the Gospel reading – “now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi”, and I can look that up on a map. Caesarea Philippi is a Roman town high up in the headwaters of the Jordan, by Mount Hermon. It’s in the area we know as the Golan Heights – which takes me back to the wars between Israel and Syria of the 1970s and 80s. It still a disputed area – and, although the Syrian conflict has disappeared off the news headlines – the human suffering of that part of the world has not disappeared.

Jesus is quite a few miles north of his normal area of operation. He is away from the crowds, perhaps away from the busyness – the disciples are with him, they are away from their families – so perhaps this is a good time for Jesus to sit them down, have this discussion. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

The Son of Man is a title often used in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus uses it of himself. Apparently, in the Aramaic language of the time, “Son of Man” was a phrase used, meaning a ‘human’ in contrast with ‘God’, and it could also be used in the same sense of ‘one’ – one does this, one does that. In the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, God calls Ezekiel his son of Man, meaning “human being”. In Daniel chapter 7, the prophet has a vision of “one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven” – and you can see how a vision like this got interwoven, linked in, with the ministry and vision of Jesus.

The use of “The Son of Man” as a title does not seem to have been used by anyone at the time of Jesus, so it may well be that Jesus used it of himself. To call himself “Messiah” or “Christ”, that carried a lot of meaning. To call himself “The Son of Man” is using a title that in itself gets the listeners thinking. What does he mean, who is he?

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples answer by talking about what they know. Let’s use the evidence we can see, the people we know, and let’s work from what we know to explain what we don’t yet know. They knew who John the Baptist was – he was a prophet, he was a miracle worker, he

came from good Jewish stock. They knew the stories of the John's birth, they knew how he had spent time in the desert, they knew he had baptised, they knew his influence. They had seen him at work, perhaps even – as Jesus' cousin – John and his disciples had sat and shared meals and conversation with Jesus and his disciples. We know about John, so it is perfectly possible, that Jesus is another John the Baptist. Worth reminding ourselves that John has just paid the ultimate price, killed by Herod after a drunken party – that will give all of Jesus' disciples pause for thought.

They knew all about Elijah and Jeremiah. These are the huge figures of their faith. They knew the stories, they knew the legends – they knew these stories and legends better than we do. (Indeed, why not sit with your bible and use a lovely sunny afternoon to re-read the stories?). Jesus fits very well into what we would call this Old Testament background, he fits very well as a prophet, like those of the past. The Jews needed a prophet, they needed someone who could provide leadership – yes, this is who Jesus is.

But then Jesus turns the question to them. “But who do you say that I am?” Not them, not the people, not Society, not history – not what do other people say? “But who do you say that I am?”

Put yourself there with the disciples. Jesus looks round at you all, “But who do you say that I am?”

So who answers first? Every group has someone who usually opens his mouth first – and in this group he is called “Peter”. I say nothing! Did he answer because someone had to take a lead, or did he answer because he knew that it was the truth. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Literally ‘Messiah’ means “anointed one” – just as King David was anointed by Saul, Jesus was anointed by the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism. The word “Christ” has the same meaning as “Messiah”

Peter is telling Jesus he knows exactly who he is. He is the Messiah, he is God's anointed one, he is the one who will transform this world, he is the Son of the living God.

The relationship of Son to Father – and we have to be careful when we use these human relationships to illuminate our view of Jesus. The sons among us may have had good relationships with our fathers, we may have good relationships with our sons – or we may not. The mother/daughter relationship should also illuminate our understanding of God – and it is such a shame we haven't allowed it to do so. I like the definition of Jesus as the human face of God, it is

an image that helps me. When my eldest son was desperately ill, I got a new understanding of the relationship of God and Jesus, I know what it is likely to see two sons suffer and die – and I have seen how the love of God heals the pain of suffering and death.

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” While life has its moments, and at times it is incredibly hard work – it is amazing.

I believe we need faith in “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” to get us through our lives, to get us through life in these Covid times. Talking to people who tell me how tough it is, but their faith is getting them through. People in our community who tell me that God is speaking to them through “Songs of Praise” on the telly, or services on line, or the material I put on the internet. People who have found they can, and do, say their prayers at home, in their garden, on a country walk – that is encouraging.

There are plenty in the Church of England as a whole who say we really don't need these buildings because all we need is Christ. In one way, they are right – the Kingdom of God will continue if all our churches never reopen. Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” in a time when church buildings hadn't even been invented. And he will remain “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” even if the whole world, and the whole edifice of the church, collapses around our ears. Many of us have been forced to work on our relationship with Jesus in a world where we can't come together as a church, as a worshipping community, and we have found Christ – I hope we've found a deeper relationship. But many of us find our faith deepened and encouraged and supported by the love and faith we find in these places – because they are Holy Places and here we meet other Christians.

Yesterday we welcomed Shaun and Georgina into this Holy Place for their wedding. We have welcomed them here before – at Christmas, when they came to hear their banns called. So yesterday I had a church as full as we're allowed to be of occasional churchgoers, but they prayed and worshipped and celebrated, and I do believe they had a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. We didn't want to wear masks, we didn't want to socially distance, we didn't want to acknowledge the changes Covid has made to our lives, our celebrations. But we didn't sit here in fear and despair, we didn't fight it with anger, we fought it with confidence, love and laughter.

We are going to need a lot of confidence, love and laughter to move on in this changing world of ours – and we can do that. The church has been doing that for 2000 years, here in Allestree we've been doing it for about 1000 years. We can do that – and we can offer our confidence, love and laughter to the world.

We offer Christ, from him comes our confidence, love, laughter, forgiveness, strength, all that is good, positive, and comes from God.

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” – and we are blessed if we recognise Jesus as our Messiah, our Lord, our life. If you don’t, do so today. Flesh and blood may well help us understand, flesh and blood may worship with us, flesh and blood are part of our faith – but flesh and blood can only go so far. We need that relationship with our Father in heaven – and we found our faith on rock.

We went to Powis Castle near Welshpool a couple of weeks ago. An amazing castle, literally built on the top of a rock. Coming down from the front of it are stunning gardens, and it was fascinating seeing how they have their foundations deep in the rock. Huge heights of box hedge – so huge they have to get a cherry picker in every year to ensure the gardeners can get to the top of it. We watched as they made sure their cherry picker is on firm foundations before they ascend to the heights.

On Friday at Blist’s Hill Museum at Ironbridge we went on a tour of the iron foundry. I know the difference between cast iron and wrought iron. Our country is, quite literally, built on a foundation of rock – ironstone, limestone, coal – all of these the basis of the industrial revolution, the foundation of our Empire. (Though it’s a fascinating question as to how better the industrial revolution would have been if we’d built it on the renewable energy of the Derwent in its valley, rather than the coal and iron of the Severn gorge).

Peter is given the keys, and we understand that imagery too. One of the things we give a Vicar at his licensing are a set of keys. When our Gareth was Verger at Hexham Abbey he was always rather pleased that his set of keys was so much bigger than mine – and he had a the key to the Saxon crypt. I was so jealous!

I wonder what Peter thought about being given such an important set of keys. Did the other disciples wonder why him? Did they feel second rate because he had spoken first? Were they as certain a Peter, or were they still wondering? Who knows – and it doesn’t matter. They were still Jesus’ disciples, they still journeyed with him – and there was work to be done. Later they would make their own confession or, in the case of Judas, decide this was not the Messiah they believed him to be.

For now, they were told not to tell anyone that Jesus was the Messiah. That was then – this is now. Tell of the love of God, show the love of God, because this is the living God. As Jesus says in John chapter 10 “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Amen.