

Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Isaiah 51:1-6

¹Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. ²Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. ³For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

⁴Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. ⁵I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. ⁶Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Romans 12 :1-8

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon by Reverend Sara Davies (Assistant Curate)

May the words I speak be those you want spoken, may the words we hear be those you want heard, O Lord our strength and redeemer, Amen.

Today’s Bible readings are based around us knowing who we are and our understanding of Jesus. My brother-in law met his dad for the first time in his life last week, 51 years without really knowing anything about that side of his family, what he thought he did know wasn’t quite as he thought. I can’t imagine how he must have felt. They did get on and I have seen a photo of just how much alike they look. I like watching the TV programme ‘Who do you think you are?’ where celebrities are helped to discover their family history. I believe that if your family is just too boring, they don’t go any further with the process. I’m sure that my family would be far too ordinary, with no-one of any note.

In our Gospel reading we hear of how people found it hard to understand who Jesus really was. The Jewish religious groups the Pharisees and Sadducees understood Jesus to be a threat to their leadership and power. Whilst their views were opposed on many issues, they were joined in their wish to have him killed. They refused to believe that he was the Messiah.

It was when the disciples travelled to Caesarea Philippi, that Jesus chose to ask them who they really thought he was. This was an interesting choice as they were in a place where a variety of people had been worshipped. First there was the god Baal, then the Greek god Pan and then Caesar. The Roman ruler Philip named the city after himself and the emperor Caesar. In this place where so

many other gods had been worshiped, Jesus asks the pivotal question “Who do you say I am?,” at a pivotal time in his ministry.

The disciples answered Jesus’ question with the common view, that he was one of the prophets brought back to life, in line with Old Testament predications. There were of course many answers that they could have given, from their own experience they could simply have said teacher, healer, preacher. Others saw Jesus as a trouble- maker or even a magician. One thing that he wasn’t was some sort of military leader who would lead the Israelites to over- throw the Romans, which was what many had imagined.

Jesus may well have been looking to discern whether or not, after his departure which was fast approaching, his apostles would feed his people the Word of God, or become like the Pharisees and distort the Scriptures. One person stood up to the mark, this was of course Peter who said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. The same Peter who had made mistakes along the way, most notable denying Jesus not once but three times, now confidently recognising Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, the Son of the God who is alive, unlike the pagan gods of Caesarea Philippi. Peter recognises in Jesus the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise, of a divine Son as anointed king.

Jesus in turn identifies Peter as the rock on which he would build his Church. Just as Peter had revealed the true identity of Christ, so Jesus revealed Peter’s identity and role. Jesus praised Peter for his confession of faith. It is faith like Peter’s that is the foundation of God’s kingdom.

This isn’t the first time that we have heard mention of a rock today. In our Old Testament reading the prophet Isaiah speaks of God reminding people of their spiritual heritage, of their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the rock and quarry, from whom they are descended. This was addressed to Israelites at a very difficult time in their history; many Israelites had fallen away from their faith, Israel’s rulers had been corrupt, and many Israelite exiles had been worshipping idols as people would go onto do in Caesarea Philippi. Many had also been guilty of false worship and injustice, but there were also those who had kept the faith, and it is to those people that these words are addressed. The purpose of these words was to encourage these righteous people to continue in the faith and not to falter in these last days before their deliverance, to remember who they were. The faithful remnant may have felt alone because they were few, and this is a little of how I have felt at times recently.

Understandably, I think all of our recent sermons or homilies have related into the current pandemic that we find ourselves in, and we do need to try and make sense of this together. I have found things even more difficult recently as it has become obvious that there will be no 'quick fix' to the COVID situation, it won't 'all be over by Christmas' as they said about the First World War. We continue to live in a huge period of uncertainty, many people are anxious about going out, coming into contact with others and some of our usual ways of life may never return. Our life as Christ's Church has been challenged in new ways. We miss being together in our churches, worshipping together, sharing in Holy Communion, socialising, attending weddings, baptisms and funerals, having physical contact be it sharing the Peace or greeting friends. We are of course developing how we can come together on- line but this isn't accessible to everyone and there is a stiling of two- way communication. It is a fact that some people will never return to Church and in the first instance our numbers may well diminish.

Whilst I personally do not feel that I have lost my identity as a committed Christian, Isaiah has a message for us; Abraham was only one person, but much came from his great faithfulness. Initially Abraham and Sarah couldn't have children, but they put their trust in God and God made a great nation from them. It was shown that if the faithful few could remain faithful, hold onto who they were, even more could come from them, surely that must give us hope over the coming months?

St Paul in his letter to the Romans also offers hope at this time, reminding us of the individual gifts that we are given through God's grace, and working through the practical implications of God's saving mercy. We hear of how God has given us each a differing measure of faith, and Paul calls upon each of us to assess ourselves realistically and our personal understanding of Jesus. Whilst we are unique, with our own stories, our own attributes, just as the human body is one, with its many parts, so the Church is united though composed of many members. As Christians we should concentrate on using the gifts that we have been given, whether they be teaching, generosity, leadership or simply being cheerful when all around are struggling.

Perhaps over the last few months we have discovered new gifts that we did not know that we had, maybe resilience, patience, practical skills for example. Have we consciously given time to thinking how we could use them? Maybe we have come to understand ourselves better whilst in lockdown. Our united role as Christians is to be faithful and to seek ways to serve others with what Christ has

given us, may be this is a time when we rethink what it means to be part of Christ's Church and how we can contribute to the coming of God's Kingdom.

So, to return to that original question of who Jesus is, what is our understanding of him at this present time? I would suggest that each of us must answer this for ourselves, as an examination of our own lives. Who do we say Jesus is as COVID spreads around the world? Who do we say Jesus is when we are faced with decisions that have no easy answers, when the storms of life overwhelm us, when faithfulness means risking it all and taking a stand against a louder and seemingly more powerful majority where God has no place? Who we say Jesus is has everything to do with who and how we are. It guides our decisions, and determines the actions we take and the words we speak. It discloses the depth of our motivation for and commitment to following him. Who Jesus is to us will change as we go through life, how we understand him now will most likely differ from how we understand him in 5 years' time. We need to hold onto this when our faith is challenged, when we feel part of a remnant of believers, when our position changes within the body of Christ.

Jesus' statement about Peter didn't mean that he would have greater authority than the other apostles, that his teaching would be infallible or that there would be a special office for Peter and his successors. All believers are joined into Christ's Church by having faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour, none of us are too ordinary for God to build a great nation from us. To all who believe in Christ and obey his words, the kingdom doors are swung wide open, this is the key.

Amen