

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 11th Sunday after Trinity – 23rd August 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

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'Who do you say that I am?' The question Jesus asked his disciples is one that we need to ask ourselves today. In our hearts and minds, who do we believe Jesus to be? And what sort of testimony do we offer of him through our words and actions, our loves and our lives – as individuals, and as a church community? What will others discover of him through us?

The question comes at a turning point in the Gospel, both literally and metaphorically. Jesus and his disciples have reached the northernmost point of their journey, as they travel to spread the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Caesarea Philippi, almost on the border of Syria, had Gentile associations. The Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, had given the town to Herod the Great at around the time of Jesus's birth. Herod had named it Caesarea in acknowledgement of the gift, and Herod's son Philip had added his own name to it after the death of the emperor. Yet it is here, as far from Jerusalem as the disciples are recorded as travelling, that they are asked the question who it is that they are following. And it is once they have given their answer that the narrative turns and the long journey towards Jerusalem will begin, culminating in Jesus's suffering and death.

Jesus begins by asking the easier question: who are other people saying he is? The disciples list the various answers they have heard along the way. In Matthew's account their answers help prepare the ground for the transfiguration which occurs in the following chapter. The replies - John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets – name important individuals who have announced key points in the history of salvation.

Names are always important in Scripture. They disclose something about the roles people are to play in the unfolding of salvation. We saw a few weeks ago how Jacob was renamed Israel. The names of Jesus and of John the Baptist are announced by angels to their mother and father respectively. One of the key moments in the Old Testament is when Moses asks God for his name and God appears to elude the question. To know someone's name is to have power over them, and no one can have that power over God. In the Jewish tradition God's reply to Moses, 'I am who I am', is never spoken aloud.

Yet in our Gospel reading today Jesus questions his disciples about his own identity. He puts them on the spot: who do you say I am? And it is Simon Peter who responds: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' In these momentous words, Jesus is recognised and named for who he is. They mark a turning point in his mission, as he turns towards Jerusalem. They also mark a turning point in humanity's understanding of the divine. For we are dealing with a God who no longer keeps his distance, guards his identity, but has come among us as one like us.

Jesus responds to this recognition with blessing: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.' And this is when he names Simon '*petros*', the rock on which the church will be built. It is a new name, a new identity. Like the identity each of us receives in baptism.

'Who do you say that I am?' It's a question we need to keep asking ourselves, as individuals and as a church. When we think of Jesus, how does it alter the way we respond to things that happen to us? Does it alter the way we interact with others? How are we to discern his call on our lives? If we can focus on these questions, we will find ourselves in turn asking Christ what name he gives to us. Who does he say we are? As Paul points out in our epistle, the contribution that each of us makes as followers of Jesus will be different. But we need to work out what it should be. We do have a unique contribution to make and each of our names is known to God. As Isaiah puts it: 'thus says the Lord, he who created you...: I have called you by name, you are mine' (Isaiah 43.1). And not only is this a question about our vocation, the vocation that each one of us has as a follower of Christ, but it is a matter of the whole of God's salvation history being brought close to each of his creatures. For the full quotation is this:

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the LORD your God, ... your Saviour.
... you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you.'

Peter's understanding of Jesus's identity is that he is the key to God's relationship with all that he has made. With that knowledge, the gates of Heaven stand open to his followers and they may be unafraid of Hades. That's quite a claim, but it is the promise that has been handed on to us. The way will not be easy, as we shall discover next week from the verses that follow in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

But for now, at the furthest extremity of their journey, the disciples have the clarity to see that the promised answer to their people's prayer has arrived. As the fourth evangelist puts it, the Word has been made flesh and is living among them, and they have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Amen.