

SERMON 27 AUGUST 2017

When I was a child, we regularly went on family outings in the car at the weekend in the summer. To begin with I loved these occasions, but soon began to suspect that my brother, who was five years older than I and who often planned these drives, had ulterior motives. He had become passionate about old churches and this, being Britain, there were plenty of those on offer. I began to protest, rather loudly, as I recall. But the protests fell on deaf ears. In the end, I succumbed and bought a little book about country churches. I may say that my brother, who went on to become an archaeologist, has never lost this passion, though it is now coupled with country gardens. I look forward to these ongoing trips when I stay with them.

I am sure we can all imagine great cathedrals in European cities, wonderful, inspiring places, and many of us will have visited such places. Here, of course have St Mary's, St Andrew's and St Stephens, though St Stephen's here in Sydney can't qualify as a cathedral since it doesn't have a bishop. The scale of some of these churches is awe inspiring, as it is meant to be, and when one can sit there and listen to soaring organ music and choirs, they touch on the sublime. We may not reach such heights here at Lindfield Uniting Church, but nevertheless, this place of worship can still draw us out from our normal consciousness of time and space and indicate to us what is sacred.

This is all good, but when we come to today's gospel reading from Matthew, we come to a point of tension. First of all, let's look at what is said. Matthew places this in Caesarea Philippi, the place of Herod's palace, a place of power. The Emperor Augustus had given the town to Herod the Great. His son Philip, on the death of the emperor, enlarged the town and added his own name to it. This is not the Herod of Jesus' time, Antipas, who had had John the Baptist beheaded. In this place that was full of evidence of Roman power and commerce and of those whose rule kept the Jewish people oppressed, Jesus asks his disciples the searching question: "Who do people say that I am?" The answer is easy enough: "John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets". "But who do *you* say that I am?" "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", answers Peter. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

The question and Simon's answer are very similar in Mark and Luke, though their context is different. Matthew expands on Simon's answer. The words that follow about him being named as Peter and the rock on which Jesus will build his church, about the gates of Hades not prevailing against it and the keys of the kingdom being given to Peter are only found in Matthew. They must have had some special relevance for Matthew's community and are not easy for us to understand. This community was a long time before we come to the Roman Catholic Church for whom they have particular meaning. The image of the rock is not new. Jesus, in Matthew, had already told people the parable about the wise man building his house on rock.

I don't want to get caught up in these particularities because they are not necessarily very enlightening. But there are two clear strands that emerge from this passage. The first is the question: "Who do you say that I am?" We are not often asked this. We may be asked to affirm our belief whenever we say one of the creeds. We may be asked to affirm our belief when we make or renew commitment, as at the commissioning of Church Council. This is different from being asked who we think Jesus is. Simon and the other disciples had been living with and following Jesus every day. They had been listening to him, seeing how he reached out to people, healed them in more ways than just of physical illness. They had heard him dispute with the Pharisees about how the Law was meant to be kept and had seen him disregard it at times, when grace and love was the greater need. They knew that he was different. He touched their minds, their hearts, the deep places of their lives. They still had to accept what was quite mind-blowing, that here, in this man, they were discovering the Messiah for whom the Jewish people had waited in anticipation for centuries. There were times when they could wholeheartedly make that leap of faith, and there were times when they questioned, because this was not how they thought the Messiah was meant to be.

Who do you say that I am? The question comes to us passing through millennia of the Christian Church. Around it there are many other words that we have been taught about Jesus: Saviour, Redeemer, Lord, as well as maybe companion, brother, teacher, guide and many others. Very often there is an overlay of church doctrine and we may have some anxiety about saying the right thing, believing the right

thing. That is about orthodoxy. And here's the rub, the dilemma. We are caught between freeing ourselves to answer the question, allowing ourselves to touch into the sometimes ill-formed, sometimes amazingly vivid responses of our hearts, that and the language and teaching of the church.

Is Jesus the property of the church? That is a big question to dare to ask! It is often said, as in the quote from Stanley Hauerwas on the cover-page of your order of service, that Jesus did not come to found a church. As we heard this morning, he instituted the church which was a group of his followers. He was not about setting up buildings, committees, in other words an organization. He was, first and foremost, giving people an example of how they/we should live as children of God. "Follow me" he said to his disciples. Yes, he taught them how they should aspire to live as a community of faith as in the extensive teaching Matthew records in the Sermon on the Mount. This was not telling them about what they should believe but about how they should live and about turning to God in faith and prayer to enable them to do that. He was an example of demonstrating God's love and God's longing for justice between people. He was an example of doing that even through the threat and anger, violence and execution. He did this through the power and strength of God's love. He was not about setting up an organisation that would worship him. For instance, when the young man comes to him and addresses him as "good master", he ask the man why he addresses him like that since only God is good. Of course, in the Church, we now understand Jesus as Son of God, as embodying God. But this was not the way Jesus explained things.

In today's reading he uses the common phrase "Son of Man" for himself. Simon acknowledges him as "Son of the Living God", a phrase that the disciples have already used about Jesus when he and Simon came back into the boat on the Sea of Galilee after Simon had stepped out to meet Jesus who had come to them walking on the water. This was a miracle to help the disciples see what God's power could do and so how it might strengthen them. The disciples had seen. They, and Simon in particular, were ready to answer Jesus question: "Who do you say that I am?". They knew that their salvation, literally their health and well-being, their hope, was found in him. This was not about a doctrine about forgiveness of sins, or only being saved through him. That became part of church teaching later. This, for them

was about seeing how God's kingdom here on earth was meant to be enacted and understanding that this was what they were to be a part of. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven", Jesus has already taught them. Peter is charged with the responsibility of leading that into action in the future, a future they could not anticipate at the time, though Matthew's community knew. Paul knew this very well. In the passage we heard from Romans today he writes to this community of faith about how they should understand themselves as church. They were to be like a body, and bodies have many different parts. Their life was to be about realising what each one of them had been gifted with, humbly, and then using that gift for the good of all. The community's focus then is about what it can do for the sake of others. Those of you who follow With Love to the World will have read the quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The first confession of the Christian community before the world is the deed which interprets itself."

So, let's step aside again for a moment. The dilemma for us is about how we answer the question "Who do you say that I am?" and how we understand the Church and Jesus' relationship to it. If Jesus were to return now, where would we find him? Of course people often speculate on this kind of imagining. We cannot know. But maybe it seems unlikely that he would appear at a church service or sitting in a mighty cathedral somewhere. It is much more likely, according to what we know of his life and ministry, that he would be somewhere far away from places of privilege and power, in places where there was need for healing, for love, for justice, for compassion. That is not to belittle or disregard the wonderful work that goes on in his name in churches all over the world, ministries of love carried out by ordinary people everywhere, rich and poor. One might imagine Jesus saying "Well done, good and faithful servants!" But, sadly, churches have too often become places that judge and exclude people because their lives are not deemed to be lived rightly, where the emphasis is on sin and disobedience; where people may feel they can't belong because they would not be accepted. Unfortunately, as power and wealth has accrued over centuries, the organisations have forgotten that Jesus called them to follow his example, not set him on a pedestal.

Philip Gulley, some time ago now wrote a book called "If the Church Were Christian. Rediscovering the values of Jesus." There are chapters like "Jesus would be a

Model for Living rather than an Object for Worship”, and “Reconciliation would be valued over Judgement”. It is not always comfortable reading because it forces us to look at how easy it is for the churches, all of us, to be caught up in orthodoxy – right teaching and learning – rather than orthopraxis – right practice or living. Gulley, who is a Quaker pastor, tells some terrible stories about people who have been shamed, blamed, and thereby forever cut off from the church, people who have been so diminished they would never want to go back anyway. But he also tells of a couple who started a very small Quaker church which he was called to pastor. He says “They were compassionate and loving and had an easy, unaffected manner.” The couple were involved in a number of things like volunteering at a homeless shelter and being available to people in need. Gulley writes “Over the years the meeting they had helped to found took on their demeanour. A light, buoyant spirit infused the meeting’s worship and activities. The meeting was incredibly generous and regularly emptied its bank account to help the less fortunate. Because of our close proximity to several resources for the homeless, we were often visited by mentally ill people, all of whom were warmly welcomed and made to feel at home. In my nine years there”, he says, “I would encounter persons who’d once attended the meeting. Their assessment was universal – ‘I attended that church when I was really down, and they helped me.’”

“Who do you say that I am?” There follows “What kind of church are my followers to be?” Jesus instituted something that was about carrying on his example. We try to do that, as best we may. The organisation was the Churches have become was probably inevitable, and it is most certainly not all bad. At its best it is wonderful. At its best it points us back to Jesus and is a place of welcome for all who are in need, and a voice for those who are silenced and powerless. At its best it sustains us in times of difficulty and grief.

Pondering today’s reading and the questions it contains and those it alludes to is of critical importance for us all, as individuals and as part of a church which hopefully has nourished us and sustained us, challenged and encouraged us, and hopes to go on doing so. Pondering the question “Who do you say that I am?” points us clearly to Jesus, whom we name as Christ, and who shows us the way we should follow.