

‘who do you say that I am?’

a sermon preached on the
eleventh sunday after pentecost

24 August 2014

at

st john’s

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by dr muriel porter

Lections: Exodus 1:8 – 2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

This morning’s Gospel is set in Caesarea Philippi, which is north of the Sea of Galilee in the land of Israel. It is at the site of one of the largest springs that feeds the River Jordan. The abundant waters from the spring make the area very fertile, and from ancient times this rich fertility made it a sacred site. The cave where the spring emerges was the home of pagan worship centuries before Christ was born because it was believed to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan. So the region was called Pnias until it became Caesarea Philippi when Philip, the son of Herod the Great, rebuilt the city, naming it after the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus and modestly, himself.

Both the Greeks and Romans built temples in the city – still today you can see vestiges of these elaborate structures. As one commentator has put it, Caesarea Philippi was a place in the shadow of ancient gods.

At the time when Jesus and his disciples visited Caesarea Philippi, it was very much a city of pagan religion, where the Greek and Roman gods and possibly among the local people, the ancient pre-hellenistic gods, were actively worshipped. There were no Jewish settlements in the region. Interesting, then, that Matthew records that it was in this extraordinary place that Peter declared that Jesus, a humble Jewish Galilean carpenter, was no less than the Messiah, the Son of the living God – the son not of one of the multitude of pagan gods worshipped in that place, but of the one and only true God. It is perhaps even more interesting that Jesus posed his question there.

There, in a thriving imperial city dedicated on the one hand to the Roman Emperor and on the other, to a whole cast of deities, Jesus asks his disciples who they believe him to be. Who do people say I am? And who do *you* say I am?

We are emerging – no, we have emerged – from a society where, for centuries, Peter’s answer would have been the stock-standard response. Who is Jesus? God’s Son, the Messiah. ‘No ifs no buts’. Western society was Christian, at least in its formal religious belief, if not always in its behaviour. To profess that Jesus is the Son of God was hardly a risky or unusual assertion. In fact, to deny it at certain times and places in the centuries after Christ was actually dangerous. It could lead to public opprobrium, banishment, or even death.

How different things are now! If we wandered up Burke Road to the Camberwell Sunday Market this morning, and took some random samplings of the crowds of shoppers, I suspect we would get quite a range of answers to the question of who is Jesus. A good man – a kind man – a good example – a prophet, a guru like Ghandi or Nelson Mandela perhaps. Son of God? Not a likely answer, I suspect.

The true identity of Jesus is a major theme in all the Gospels. Again and again, people puzzle over who this itinerant carpenter from Nazareth really is. For he is most

certainly not simply a craftsman. His healing, his teaching, his evident authority when he speaks, makes that perfectly plain. But who is he?

His mother and brothers and sisters are as puzzled as anyone else. At one point, clearly embarrassed by his public behaviour, they try to drag him away home, fearful he is actually mad. The scribes and Pharisees challenge him repeatedly to identify himself. The high priests and Pilate try to trap him into a self-identification that will condemn him. At the moment of Jesus' death, a Roman centurion believes he is in the presence of the Son of God.

In today's gospel, Jesus confronts the issue head on, in the company of his disciples. Who do *people* say that I am? he asks first. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the other prophets... they reply. That is what people are saying. Not totally dissimilar to the answers we might expect today.

Jesus presses his disciples further, however. Who do *you* say that I am? he challenges. And in a famous moment of recognition and declaration, Peter says: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". There is just one other declaration like it in the gospels. In John's gospel, another disciple, Martha, offers a similar testimony: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world".

There is the world of difference between the identity given to Jesus by the general populace, and by his close followers. Then and now. If he is just a good man, an inspiration, an example, then we can take him or leave him, like the Sunday market shoppers or the Galilean peasants. But if we acknowledge that Jesus is God's anointed one, God's Son - and therefore also God - then our response has to be very different.

Not that in recognising Jesus is God we have to abandon recognition of his great and inspiring *humanity*. Absolutely central to Christian doctrine is the teaching that Jesus is both Son of God and, to use the old language, Son of Man. He is fully, perfectly, human. He shared our human frailty in its entirety. The self-giving of God in becoming fully human for our sakes, declares God's own vulnerability and God's overwhelming love. In recognising Jesus as Son of the Living God, we also celebrate his humanity.

We need to go further than textbook doctrinal responses to Jesus' question, however. As right and proper as they are, they can leave us quite unmoved. Our response to Jesus needs to be much more personal. I invite you to reflect more deeply on this passage from Matthew's Gospel during the coming week. To imagine yourself standing among the disciples on the edge of that bustling Roman city full of pagan temples, where many and varied gods are worshipped. Or perhaps see this scene happening here and now, in the middle of our bustling city with its soaring buildings and temples to greed. Our own version of Caesarea Philippi.

Listen carefully to Jesus as he asks his questions. Who do people say that I am? Who do you say I am? Look at him. Then look into yourself. How do you respond? What does your answer mean and what difference does it make to your life?

Clearly I can't answer that question for you, but for me, if I acknowledge that Jesus is God, I believe I have no choice but to commit myself to his service as a member of his own Body, which is the Church. And that is the hard part. It would be so much easier, so much less demanding, just to acknowledge him as a good man, and get on with my own private life.

If I agree with Peter and Martha that Jesus is the Living God, and take that seriously, then like them, I believe I have no choice but to be part of the community of faith. This morning we have heard St Paul speak of the community of faith, the Body of Christ, in his letter to the Romans. "We, who are many, are one body in Christ,

and individually we are members one of another”. And he lays down what it means to be worshippers of the living God in Jesus Christ: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice”, he says, “holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do 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.”

In other words, as followers of Christ and members of his body the Church, Paul says we are committed to whole-hearted worship, to presenting our whole selves as a living sacrifice. We say this regularly in one of our post-communion prayers: ‘Father, we offer ourselves to you as a *living sacrifice*...’ That is full commitment, and is true worship. Its practical working out is the adoption of a new mind-set, enabling us through the Holy Spirit to discern the good and acceptable will of God. It means not conforming to the worship of the many and varied gods of the version of Caesarea Philippi in which we live.

It’s not hard to see that we are surrounded by temples to the gods of consumerism, materialism, atheistic rationalism, narcissism – all the ‘isms’ of the post-Christian world of contemporary Western society. We modern-day disciples of Jesus stand on the sidelines of our Caesarea Philippi, just as Peter and the others stood with Jesus on the edge of that ancient Roman city – a city incidentally now abandoned and reduced to rubble.

The community of faith, the Body of Christ, is the essential context for our salvation. I believe we cannot be part of the Body of Christ, in the long term, on our own. We are, as Paul said, members one of another. As God’s very nature, as Trinity, is communal, so is our nature. Even when we are praying alone, by using the corporate prayers of the church we can consciously ally ourselves with the great unseen Church of God continually at prayer around the world. We need each other in the Body of Christ, in the regular offering of prayer and worship and sacrament, no matter how humanly frail that offering often is.

And sometimes the Church is infuriatingly frail! At times it can test our patience and our commitment to the very limit. If it were any other organisation, we would probably have given up long ago. But in the Eucharist, the communal meal of the People of God, we are called back again and again to Jesus, the Son of the Living God, who gives us his very self, broken and bleeding, for our nourishment. This is our essential food for our journey, shared with us in a meal that cannot, by its very nature, ever be solitary.

So – here at our Lord’s table – in your private prayer during the week – ponder prayerfully: who do *you* say Jesus is?

mporter@unimelb.edu.au