

Year A Proper 21 Pentecost 13

Isaiah 51:1-6

Romans 12: 1-8

Matthew 16: 13-20

The Heart of the Matter – a living question

Well today's gospel reading gives us two questions to answer. One is really easy, the other may be a tad harder.

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" That's easy, and they trot out quite a few flattering names. I imagine that there was probably quite a flow of suggestions, even beyond what was remembered and written down in Matthew's gospel account.

Then Jesus asks them what appears to be a much harder question, "Who do you say I am?" I wonder whether there was quite an awkward silence after Jesus dropped that question into the middle of their enthusiastic chattering about who other people said Jesus was. This question, "Who do you say I am?" required a personal response. I am sure eleven disciples were thankful and very relieved when Simon Peter – of course it had to be him – broke the silence with his confessional statement, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

I don't know about you, but over the years, many years, I have come to realise that this isn't a question I could answer once and then put aside. It is a living question. I am sure, each of us, in our own ways and using language we are comfortable with, could come up with something quickly. We may find ourselves using theological language, language that we understand and can decode.

For each of us on our journey in faith, I hope that on many occasions we have had to contemplate afresh our answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?"

My response to that question has certainly changed over the years. We quite often start with creating an image of Jesus to fit into the small and narrow view

of the world that we hold – that makes for a comfortable Jesus, not able to challenge us. As children we need messages of safety, love and protection, and the Jesus presented to most of us will have met that need. As we grow in faith and wish to know Jesus on a much more personal level, and as we reach adolescence, we tend to become more critical and we explore scripture and the nature of Jesus through a critical lens. And for some the journey with our faith leads us into a deeper understanding of, and relationship with, Jesus as we expand from a rational to a more heart-based and mystical understanding of Jesus' life and mission, and to what this has to tell us about our loving God.

In our gospel reading Simon Peter makes a confessional statement, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." However, we are to learn, in the next passage in the gospel reading (which is next week's gospel passage), that when Jesus tells the disciples that he is now turning to face Jerusalem and will endure great suffering and be killed, Simon Peter rebukes Jesus and tells him he mustn't allow this to happen. This passage tells us something about Simon Peter's expectations for Jesus as Messiah, at that time. Clearly his confessional statement was right but his expectations for the Messiah were wrong. The disciples understanding of Jesus and how they would have answered that question changed dramatically over time; from their first glimpses of Jesus, through to their calling, their time learning from him, and their post-resurrection experiences.

Simon Peter's response also shows us that the answer to "Who do you say I am?" has to be more than a title.

At one level, when I sat with this question, in preparing this sermon, I had a set of words and phrases ready.

But as I reflected further on the question, I realised that this is not a question that has a perfect one-for-all-time answer, and a title is not sufficient; it has to describe a relationship.

Using one of my favourite metaphors, our faith is like a journey, a pilgrimage. I believe we are asked to live the question of who Jesus is each and every day. If we believe we have nothing else to learn about and from Jesus, I think we have missed a trick.

In exploring the question whilst undertaking the 30 day Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, it became much more personal to me. No longer using phrases I was taught as school or picked up from creedal statements of faith and the like. In exploring the question it invited me into a deeper spiritual reflection of my relationship with Jesus, and his influence on my life to date. I can recall times when I have felt such a close presence of Jesus; walking miles together, laughing in communion, praying away my burdens, holding me in my cries and tears, holding me in silence. The relationship becomes more intimate, more based on my heart than my head. And the reality is, that for the remainder of my life, I hope to continue living the question Jesus poses, and with patience, hope and faith, to see what else I find out about Jesus and how my relationship with him will change.

“Who do you say I am?”

Please don't think you have the final answer to this question. That, like a puzzle, you have solved it. I encourage you to spend time with Jesus in silence, to reflect on the question; think back to who he has been in your life. Answer the question for your present times. With faith and hope, who will Jesus be for you in the future?

But, I think we need to take this further, much further. A personal relationship with Jesus is surely the cornerstone of our faith. However, Jesus sent out his disciples to be in relationship with communities, using all that he had tried to teach them and model for them about living a life of grace, mercy, love and compassion. To challenge systems and structures which brought injustice and suffering. So we too, cannot remain content with our personal relationship with Jesus unless we are prepared to take some part in his mission to change our world so that it brings glimpses of God's kingdom to earth.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer said, “Your ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor.”

Jesus invites us into a relationship with him, each and every day. With loving patience, he asks us, “Who do you say I am?”

May our response be more than titles; may we reflect our answer through our actions, in loving response to God and our neighbours.

And may be Jesus is also inviting us to ask him the same question, “Who do you say I am?” How willing may we be to ask that question and listen with all humility and grace to Jesus’ response. That may well be a significant moment of growth and self-realisation for each one of us.

The question “Who do you say I am?” is so powerful, for us and for Jesus. We can reflect on it as if asked by Jesus and also we can invite Jesus to answer it to us.

“Who do you say I am?”

A powerful question.