

Sunday 23rd August 2020 Cathedral, Grahamstown Live-streamed on Facebook, 9.30 a.m.		12th Sunday after Pentecost Theological Education Sunday August – Month of Compassion Women’s Month
Isaiah 51:1-6	Ps 138	Romans 12:1-8
		Matthew 16:13-20
WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?		

“Jesus said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’” (Matthew 16:15-16)

We congratulate Bishop Ebenezer and Mama Noncedo Ntlali on the marriage yesterday of their daughter Zipho to Aviwe Mbuku, of Queenstown. Claire and I had the privilege of attending the wedding, and Claire was the preacher. What a wonderful celebration it was! And so good to be part of it all! We pray God’s blessing on the happy couple.

Today is Theological Education Sunday. We pray for all who study and teach theology, including staff and students at the College of the Transfiguration, and ordinands in our various dioceses throughout Southern Africa. Theology is a big word. Its literal meaning is “the science of God”, the study of the divinely revealed religious truths. Some of us have the privilege of a lifetime of being immersed in theology; but to a greater or lesser extent, all Christians, lay and ordained, are theologians: we all engage in our understanding of God. Questions and issues in theology touch on the deepest meaning of our lives and of the

whole purpose of life itself. And, of course, there is bad theology – spraying people with Doom, supporting injustice, racism, the abuse of power, destroying the environment, allowing gender-based violence; and there is good theology that draws us closer to the heart of God. What we believe affects how we live.

We ask, and we are asked, questions every day. What shall we have for supper? How did you sleep? Have you fed the dogs? What time will you be home? Shall we meet up for coffee? Everyday, ordinary questions. Then there are there are the questions for direction. Which road is it to PE? How do I find this address? Then there are the life changing questions, that we perhaps ask once or twice, ever, questions like “Will you marry me?” And our lives depend on the answer.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks the disciples a question. It is not one of those everyday household questions. It is something of a “direction” question. But essentially it is a life changing question, a theological question, a question about what, or who, the disciples believe. It goes to the heart of what they understand to be true. There are two parts to the question. The first part: “Who do people say that I am?” The second part: “Who do you say that I am?”

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? (1)¹

“Who do you say that I am?” The question follows, in Matthew’s gospel, the rejection of Jesus by so many in Israel, including Israel’s leaders. The general consensus amongst the people is that Jesus is probably John the Baptist come to life, or one of the prophets such as Elijah or Jeremiah. Now it is time for the disciples to choose. Jesus’ question, and Peter’s answer, marks the establishment of a new community, the church, a community that acknowledges Jesus’ true identity, and that becomes the focus of God’s activity in history. Indeed, Peter’s answer is a profound theological statement, and it has immensely significant practical outcomes.

The Gospel of Matthew was written primarily for Jewish Christians. Following the destruction of the temple in AD 70, Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. He is the living temple. Jesus is also the fulfilment of the promises given to King David by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 7:12-13). One of David’s descendants will rule Israel as king (and therefore as anointed one); he will be God’s son; he will build a temple; and his kingdom will last forever. All these promises and prophecies, Matthew’s gospel shows and asserts – and today’s gospel reading is key in this - are fulfilled in Jesus.

¹ Works consulted: Allison, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 865; Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 246-251; Fenton, *St Matthew*, 264-270; Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 4-8

YOU ARE THE CHRIST

“Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answers: “You are the Christ, the Messiah – the anointed one, the Son of the living God”. Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah”, and then renames him: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” There is a word play in the Greek: Petros the Rock – almost like a nickname², petra the rock on which the church will be built. The church is built on the rock of Peter and on the rock of his testimony and his faith assent as to who Jesus is. Peter is the foundation stone of the new temple. For Roman Catholics, he is the first holder of the office of the Papacy. For all Christians, Peter is a man with a unique role in salvation history. His faith is the means by which God brings a new people into being. His change of name, finally, from Simon to Peter indicates this – just as Abram received the new name of Abraham (Genesis 17). It is Jesus who will build his church – and the gates of Hades, of Hell, will not prevail against it. The ungodly powers that attack the church will not overwhelm it. There are times when the church is tearing herself apart with inward strife; and times when she is attacked by outsiders – the Zimbabwean government’s response to the letter from the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Conference is an example of such an attack. But it is Jesus who will build his church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail. Peter is given the keys of the kingdom, the authority to bind and to loose. His decisions and his teaching authority stand.

² Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 248

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? (2)

Who do you say that I am? In the rest of the New Testament we see how the understanding of who Jesus is moves from being the Christ for the Jews only, to the Christ for all nations, the universal Christ. “Who do you say that I am?” It is a question that comes to each one of us; it comes to each new generation; it is a question that is asked of the whole world. Peter’s answer is crucial, as we have seen. And so is ours. Our answer to this question determines everything that follows, the direction and focus for the rest of our lives.

What is our answer to this question? The Christian apologist and author, C.S. Lewis, describes the moment he surrendered to belief in God:

“In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England”³

I read and re-read the story of Lewis’ journey to faith in the living God, with fascination, puzzlement and also longing. I don’t always follow his argument or the steps in understanding that he took. His search for Joy – which brought him to the source of all Joy – is close to my heart. Yet my faith journey has been very different, and perhaps yours has been also. I was baptised into the life of Christ and the Church as a baby, confirmed at the age of 14 – and I took that seriously; then a prayer of repentance and

³ *Surprised by Joy*, 182

personal commitment to Christ as Lord at the age of 19, in my first year at UCT. I have never known the active resistance to God that Lewis writes about; nor his very strong desire to be “left alone”. I am probably a bit more like the Elder Brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son; always there, always (up to a point) faithful.

Yet this journey of faith, which included for me a call into the ordained ministry, has had its bumps and its times of despair. I still long for joy, for delight, for wonder; my prayer of commitment at the age of 19 was very real, but it was hardly a ‘Damascus road’ experience, which saw St Paul move from an active opposition to Jesus Christ to belief and faith. Perhaps it was more like a move from being in the shadows into the sunlight. It brought into life the smouldering coals and embers of faith that had been there from childhood. I continue to read and think and pray and wonder.

CONCLUSION

Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” My answer is that of Thomas, after the resurrection: “My Lord and my God.” What is your answer?

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Dean of Grahamstown
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