

St Peter and St Paul  
Matthew 16.13-19

Well, I'm sure that many of you have been glued to the tennis this week. Wimbledon fortnight is a highlight of our British sporting calendar.

If you've ever watched a tennis match live, you'll know that to keep up with the action, you have to look one way and then the other, as the players hit the ball back and forth across the net.

To keep up with our Gospel reading today, you have to do much the same thing, as the conversation passes back and forth between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus and his disciples arrive in Caesarea, Philippi, a predominantly Gentile area, where they can take some time out and reflect.

And perhaps as they assess how things are going, Jesus asks his disciples, "So, guys, what are people saying about me then?"

Jesus' disciples share a few of the things people have been saying:

"Some say you are John the Baptist, some Elijah, or some other prophet."

Then Jesus gets more personal;

"Ok! Enough about them, what about you? Who do you say I am?"

I wonder if you've ever noticed how good Jesus was at asking questions?

I wonder if as Christians we might sometimes be better making fewer pronouncements and asking a few more leading questions?

Anyway, it's Peter, as usual, who takes the plunge; don't you just love Peter's enthusiasm and "have a go" attitude?

Peter responds with the answer that is surely beginning to dawn on all of the disciples,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

How has Peter come to this conclusion?

No doubt from spending much time with Jesus; watching him; listening to him.

If we want to know Jesus better, we need to spend time with him!

But also, says Jesus, Peter has got to this point by God the Father revealing this great truth to him.

It's a great paradox, yet a great truth, that each and every one of us must make up our own minds about who Jesus is, and how we will respond to him; but that even our responding to Jesus in faith is a gift from God himself.

We are all responsible for the choice to follow or reject Jesus; but so that we don't boast or think we are doing God a favour, our right choice is down to God enabling us to make it.

So it is with Peter.

He makes his confession of Jesus as the messiah.

But even this is only by the grace, the help, of God.

Then a most interesting exchange takes place:

Peter 'names' Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

And Jesus names Peter, "Peter", or "Rock".

It seems to me that as a nation, and as men and women, we are collectively suffering from an identity crisis.

Once upon a time, men knew it was their job to go out to work and earn a living for their families.

Women cooked and brought up children.

The rich were rich and the poor poor because that's the way God ordered society.

Britain was a far superior nation to any other and it was our job to 'improve' the world! – whether the world liked it or not!

I of course caricature!

But whilst it is good that men and women enjoy much more equality of opportunity in our society today; that there is more social mobility (maybe); and that Britain takes her place more humbly within a family of nations;

I wonder if this has left us struggling to know who we are?

An article a while ago in the New York Times stated, "in a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has become hard to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one".

And maybe this is just as true for women as well.

But here in this exchange between Jesus and Peter we see that as Peter names Jesus as Christ, so Jesus gives Peter a new identity; a special identity; an identity based not upon who Peter projects himself as, but upon God's choosing.

And as we name Jesus as Messiah, so Jesus gives us a new identity too.

To those who name Jesus as Messiah, Jesus gives an identity as:

Child of God.

Brother or Sister.

Friend

Heir of heaven.

He calls us beloved.

There is something inside each of us that wants to know who we are. We want to know where we belong; that we are loved; that we matter.

The truth is that we can only find our identity; our meaning; our worth; our security, in the identity God gives us as his children, and as friends and brothers and sisters of Christ.

And it is when we have got this identity in place; it is then that everything else begins to fall into place too:

Our roles in our families; in our communities; our work.

If you are struggling to work out quite where you belong; where you fit in; if you are struggling to love yourself, or even like yourself; then maybe you need to come to God and say again,

“I name Jesus as my Lord. Father, help me to believe your promises to me. Confirm me as your beloved child; a brother, sister, friend of Jesus.”

If you are a couple, or a family, and feel torn every which way; and that you are rushing from one thing to another; trying to be all things to all people;

Then maybe you need to come before God and recommit to God once more, and say, “We are first and foremost a Christian family. We find our identity in our belonging to Jesus. Jesus, we chose to put you at the centre of our family life. Help us to find who we are and what we should do, in you.”

The identity that Jesus gave Peter was to be the rock on which he would build his church; a role in which God gave Jesus’ other disciples; apostles; a share (Eph 2. 20 & Rev 21.14).

On Alpha this week, we were talking about the Bible, and someone asked the question, “will more books ever be added to the bible?”

It’s a very good and, in the light of Dan Brown’s stories, an important question. But the answer is no!

The apostolic faith which we profess, has been passed on to us by those who met and spent time with Jesus. The New Testament bears witness to this.

In the Scriptures we have a complete and reliable witness to Jesus, and no subsequent revelation of such authority is possible or indeed needed.

That is not to say that God does not speak today; he does, through prophesy and revelation, through the mind of the church, through science and reason.

But all such “revelation” must be checked out and verified by its accord with the supreme revelation that God has given us through the inspired writing of the apostles in the Bible.

Let me conclude by asking you to ponder again the question that Jesus asked his disciples:

“Who do you say that I am?” asked Jesus.

Well you do you say that Jesus is?

This is the one crucial question in life – and it will, in the end determine who you are, and where you spend eternity.

In Jesus name,

Amen.