

Homily 23rd August 2020

Based on Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus' question, "who do you say I am", is just as important for us to struggle with as it was for Simon Peter and the other chosen eleven. Indeed it is vitally important to keep on asking that question in the light of whatever is happening around us and within us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, and an academic theologian, rephrased that question to ask, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" He returned from the USA to his own nation of Germany after the rise of power of the Nazi Party in the 1930s at a time when other intellectuals were moving in the opposite direction. He asked that question as the mainline churches in Germany mostly aligned themselves and their god with the ruling powers. Bonhoeffer held the churches, and Hitler, to account, challenging their falsehood with the truth, and he paid the ultimate price of his own life.

The churches in modern Australia and other western nations (used to be named "Christian" nations) still face the same dilemma. As election times approach, we will see our political leaders appearing on television news filmed at worship, although as church attendance declines this is becoming less common. More concerning is the way that charity arms of the church, such as Uniting World, become more dependent upon government support through tax deductibility and more direct means. What happens when Uniting World and similar organisations become critical of government decisions?

The church has a sorry history from Constantine to Christendom of being so closely aligned to political powers and financial powers. Ever since Emperor Constantine, in the fifth century, deemed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, and continuing to the present time, the church has not struggled very hard to distinguish itself from the powers that rule.

In his summary of this passage from Matthew's gospel, Geoff wrote that the church is to be a counter-force to those powers that promote death and suffering; to become as Jesus – "a path to life". In answering the question, "who is Jesus Christ for us today", we are called to resist the temptation of power, the temptation of becoming popular or well-liked by those in authority, or favoured by those counter forces that would use violence to overthrow the authorities.

As we face an unknown future, I put some questions for us to ponder. In what ways can we be a vehicle for life? What are the powers operating in our nation that promote death and suffering? What truth could we speak to those powers?

What to do? Read widely. Read scriptures daily using "With love to the world", or some other resource, as a guide to understanding. Pray in order to know that you are loved and therefore able to love, to forgive, and to accept forgiveness. Be open to new understandings, holding on to truth lightly. Remember the quote from H Richard Niebuhr, "we must fight their falsehood with our truth, but we must also fight the falsehood in our truth".

Finally, a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while in prison awaiting execution:

I believe God will give us all the power we need to resist in all time of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely upon ourselves and not on him alone. A faith as strong as this should allay all our fears for the future.