

A Question to Answer

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Our Gospel reading today is entitled “Peter’s Confession of Christ” where Jesus asks the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” and they reply “Well some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah and still others say One of the prophets”

And Jesus says “But what about you? Who do YOU say that I am?” and Peter replies “You are the Christ”

Good old Peter, the big fisherman – the rambunctious one, the impetuous one.

- He is the one who jumps out of the boat when Jesus comes walking to them on the water.
- He is the one who cuts off the soldier’s ear in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- He is the one who wants to build a monument or something when Jesus appears in dazzling white on the mount of transfiguration.
- He is the one who denies his master with oaths and curses – not just once but three times.

My first point this morning is that our Christianity cannot be a spectator faith. We cannot rely on the devotion of other people. Jesus follows up his first question with a second one “Ah yes but who do YOU say that I am?”

We can enjoy the great devotional music of Johann Sebastian Bach or Georges Frederick Handel or any other of the great musicians who dedicated their life and talents to the glorification of God. In similar vein, we can marvel at the great works of art inspired by the faith of the great painters such as Rembrandt. We can stand in awe of the architectural magnificence of the great cathedrals around the world, and be moved by the devotion and dedication of those who constructed them. We can be moved to tears by wonderful Christian stories – the stories of the great saints of old or even today – saints who gave up their lives for their faith and their God. We can bury ourselves in liturgy, or church organisation or mission outreach or good works – but always at the back of all our activities and crowds is Jesus saying “Yes but who do you say that I am?”

We can't ride piggy back on anyone else when it comes to our faith!

- Sure we can share and support each other
- Sure we can learn from others and from their viewpoints which may or may not be different from ours.
- Sure we can give and listen to grand sermons

But in the final analysis there is still that strange Galilean asking that question "Who do you say that I am?"

If one scrolls through the whole Bible one gets the strong impression that Christ is not just a good man or a mystic or just one of the many holy men who would wander the countryside in those times. From his claims, and his authority and deep seated wisdom he was more – much more. Peter replies "You are the Christ". If we go to Matthew's account of the same conversation Peter is reported as saying "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

Can we say Amen to that? And if so what does it mean for us here today in the 21st century. I guess it is a very personal question for each and every one of us – and equally well we will probably reply in many different ways. But reply we must for this strange Galilean will not go away.

Yes it is a question for each and every one of us - and our reply will not be just words – our reply will be embodied in the very lifestyle we choose, the things we do and don't do, the way we order our priorities and the messages we give to others by the way we live. Those things will be the true testament to our faith.

My second point is to note the way Jesus replies. He doesn't refute Peter and say no you are wrong. Rather he commends Peter and even goes further. In Matthew he says

Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

So Jesus is acknowledging that he sees himself as the Son of God. Quite a claim indeed!! And yet at no stage do we ever get the impression that he was a crazy man. Just the opposite. As I read the pages of the Gospels, I get the distinct feeling that everything that Jesus of Nazareth had to say should be taken very seriously indeed.

One thing that seems a little strange at first sights is that in both Matthew and Mark Jesus warns the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. One might have expected that Jesus would be accepted better if his disciples shouted from the rooftops that here was the Christ – the Messiah, the expected one. But Jesus was not into flashy sensational shows. Often when he healed people he told them to go away and say nothing about it.

In actual fact, he didn't want a circus following nor did he want an expectant crowd expecting military might to take on the Romans. Rather he wanted people to see the reality and power of God's presence throughout his teachings, his example and his life.

Maybe there is lesson for us here too. Not so much ostentatious shows of holiness. Rather may our light and living so shine before people that they may see God's gospel in action and know that there is something rather special here. So our witness to our faith will come through far more powerfully by the way we live and nurture and care and heal and persevere and reach out in love.

My final point is to come back to Peter. As Jesus said, he was to be the rock on which his church was to be built. As we know all the popes down throughout the ages have continued a succession starting with Peter. What an honour! And yet wasn't this the same Peter who denied Christ three times. This wasn't a slip of the tongue or a moment's lapse. It was an outright and repeated denial accompanied by curses and swearing.

You know what is amazing, Jesus knew all this was to happen. He actually predicted that Peter would deny his Lord three times before the cock crew. Jesus knew exactly what a mixture Peter was; he could see the potential and he could also see the weakness and the frailty.

I have a soft spot for Peter because I can relate to him very much. We too make bold promises and have high hopes and expectations. And we too are human and weak and frail. And so often we must disappoint our Lord because we have failed to deliver. We too have denied our Lord – probably not in a cold courtyard around a fire waiting for a crucifixion.

- But maybe in our dealings with other people,
- Maybe at a dinner party,
- Maybe when we establish our priorities,
- Maybe when we overlook people,
- Maybe when we rationalise what we can and cannot do.
- Maybe when we decline to stand up for issues of honour in our community.

So many of the Biblical heroes were oh so human. David, Samson. Paul and so on. And of course we are the same. But God takes us on board warts and all and works with us to bring in his kingdom.

Charles Colson was former special assistant to President Richard Nixon and pled guilty to Watergate related offenses in 1974. He served 7 months in prison and became president of the Prison Fellowship located in Virginia. He died in 2012 and in his lifetime he authored numerous books including the best seller “Born Again”. Yes he was weak, yes he was fallible and yes he paid the price for this weakness. But more importantly, yes God is continuing to build his kingdom with the help of the testament of Chuck Colson and his life.

Yes, just like with Peter, God knows our every weakness and yet still wants to continue building His church through us. He knows we are human and fallible. He also knows that we, just like Peter, can become strong, and bold and fearless through his strength.

Jesus is still saying Who do you say that I am? It is a question to answer for each and every one of us.

*When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet and made a Calvary;
They crowned him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed him by,
They never hurt a hair of him, they simply let him die.
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give him pain,
They only just passed down the street and left him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried "Forgive them for they know not what they do",
And still it rained a wintry rain that drenched him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.*

Amen