

**SERMON 23 AUGUST 2020**  
**St. John the Baptist, Crowthorne**  
**10.00 a.m. back in Church (socially distanced)**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – Proper 16**

**READINGS:**

**Isaiah 51:1-6**

**Romans 12:1-8**

**Matthew 16: 13-20**

**PRAYER:**

Lord, please take my words and infuse them with your Spirit for your greater glory. Amen.

**SERMON:**

Two weeks ago we had the final on-line Service and I found it strangely emotional. I was particularly moved by some of the words in the three chosen hymns. I wonder if others felt the same?

“And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never; good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever.” Words I have sung many times before but they seemed to indicate my feelings during Lockdown that God’s goodness would not fail us and that we would return to his house one day. Maybe not, as yet, to sing but we have taken one step.

Then in the chorus of ‘Colours of day’: “Open the door, let Jesus return”. Of course, he has never gone from this place but it seemed to signify to me the promise of Worship again in our Church and reuniting as a body of Christ in this special place.

Finally: “All for Jesus! All for Jesus!  
This the Church’s song shall be,  
Till at last the flock is gathered  
One in love, and one in thee.”

And today some are gathered and we long for the day when all are able to return hoping that those who are not physically here can join, as part of our body, in listening to the recording of this Service.

Throughout the last months I am sure many of you have had questions; I know I have! And in today’s Gospel Reading Jesus asked his disciples some questions.

First, he asked who people were saying he was.

And his disciples answer:

John the Baptist

Elijah

Jeremiah or some other prophet

It is a puzzle as to why Jesus went to the district of Caesarea Philippi as it would have been a long journey, 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee, which he and the disciples would have walked. Maybe Jesus wanted to see a beautiful part of his country where the source of the river Jordan is or maybe he simply wished to have peace to teach the disciples, as the population there was predominantly non-Jewish.

This first question Jesus asked the disciples was in many ways the easy one. It is always easier to give other peoples' views of something or someone than to give your own because you are not putting yourself on the spot. And, if you reflect on it, all the answers the disciples gave were pleasant, affirming and complimentary.

Many thought John the Baptist so great a figure that he could well have come back from the dead. Elijah was considered to be the greatest of the prophets and Jeremiah was viewed as a forerunner to the coming, longed-for Messiah.

I wonder though if the disciples had heard less pleasant things about who people thought Jesus was but chose not to mention them. My feeling is that it would have been extraordinary if there was no negative feedback given that, soon Jesus was to be arrested, tried and crucified. But we shall never know.

Then Jesus asked the disciples the crunch question: "Who do you say I am?"

I think that there may well have been a moment of silence and then Peter responds: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

How pleased Jesus must have been to hear that. At least one of his disciples had recognised him as the Messiah, the Anointed one of God, his work was safe because there was at least someone who understood, someone who got the point.

Peter is rewarded by being likened to a rock. On Peter's solid knowledge about the identity of Jesus we are told the Church will be built.

My belief is that Peter is the rock in a special sense.

Peter himself is not the rock on which the Church is founded; that rock is God. But Peter is the first stone of the whole Church. Peter was the first person on earth to discover who Jesus was; he was the first person to make the leap of faith and see in Jesus the Son of the living God. Peter was the first member of the Christian Church and, in that sense, the whole Church is built on him.

It is as though Jesus is saying to Peter: "Peter, you are the first person to grasp who I am; you are therefore the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the Church which I am founding."

Perhaps it does not seem an adequate foundation for the Church? Wouldn't we expect more rules and ethical norms to have been laid down? How is it that Peter's sole qualification for the job, apart from a big mouth, is that he can recognise the activity of God when he sees it. But that is what Paul is suggesting in our Roman's passage today "Be transformed" he says, "so that you may discern what is the will of God."

True worship is the offering to God of one's body, and all that we do every day with it. Real worship is not the offering to God of a liturgy, however noble, and a ritual, however magnificent. Real worship is the offering of everyday life to God, not something transacted in a church, but something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God.

So relevant during the past months and into the future as we adjust to a new normal.

Whilst we can happily say we are here to worship God we also need to be able to say we are going to our homes, our factories, shops, offices, schools, garages, gardens, fields to worship God.

Isaiah too in the three short prophecies heard today neatly describes those who receive the prophetic word as those who know and do what is right according to their religion and thus they are those who will recognise the acts of divine intervention which will be realised as the people move towards an exodus from Babylon. They are words of comfort to those who pursue righteousness despite their exile.

Again how appropriate for our situation today.

Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" is not addressed only to Peter and his disciples.

In the years after Peter everyone who makes the same discovery as Peter is another stone added into the community of the Church of Christ.

This passage teaches us that our discovery of Jesus Christ must be a personal one. It can never be second hand. We can know every theory ever taught on Jesus by great philosophers and theologians and still not be a Christian. Christianity never consists of knowing **about** Jesus it is always about **knowing Jesus**. Jesus demands a personal verdict.

So to all here today and to all listening at home Jesus asks: "Who do you say I am?"

Please take that question with you this week and consider what your answer to Jesus is.