

Who do you say that I am?

A sermon preached for the Patronal Festival Service at St Peter's Wolvercote, 11.00am on Sunday 1st July, 2007 by the Rev'd Dr Mark Harries, Chaplain of Oriel College

The readings at this service were: Ezekiel 3:22-27; Acts 12:1-11; Matthew 16:13-19

Matthew 16:13-19

¹³When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

"Who do you say that I am?" So asks Jesus of his disciples. And Peter famously replies "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Well one day, sometime after that episode, there's a particularly large number waiting to get into heaven. It's the first day of Peter's new job looking after the keys to the gates of heaven, and he's in a panic. He goes to see Jesus to tell him that there's complete chaos at the gates. Jesus calmly goes along to sort it all out, and decides to separate everyone waiting into a fast queue and a slow queue. He asks them this simple question: "Who do you say that I am?" So the first person comes forward and Jesus asks: "Who do you say that I am". It's a Baptist, and he begins: "Well, the Bible says...". Jesus stops him and says "Right, go over to the slow queue over there, you won't be getting into heaven today." The next person is a Catholic; Jesus asks "Who do you say that I am?" The Catholic replies "Well the Pope says..." Jesus stops him there, and sends him to the slow queue as well. The next person is an Anglican: "Who do you say that I am?" The Anglican says straightaway "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Jesus is about to say, "Excellent, you can go straight into heaven", when the Anglican continues "On the other hand..."

Of course, Anglicans are famous (infamous) for not wanting to be too precise about some issues, despite the fact that we adhere to all the same Creeds, Church Councils, Church Fathers and so on as everyone else. In my job as a College Chaplain, I've become particularly sensitised to this issue of Anglican wooliness. That's because my regular congregation is so very, very ecumenical, there are regulars from every major Christian denomination, although the centre of gravity tends to fall somewhere between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. It is a truly wonderful thing that we're so diverse, but sometimes we don't understand each other too well. Things came to a head last November, when a visiting preacher (an Anglican priest) said he didn't believe in Hell. That started a whole series of quite heated arguments which took most of a term to die down, with me trying to occupy (rather uncomfortably) a mediating role. You can probably imagine how it worked out, Catholics and some Protestants on one side, Anglicans mostly on the other. If one side seemed too terrifyingly hard-line, the other was accused of being too woolly, too ready to sit on the fence.

I'm not sure that we ever reached a resolution on that issue – neither side came out of it particularly well. But we've managed to put it behind us now, and I think that we all learnt something from it. For me at least, it reinforced the message that there are times when it's best not to say too much.

Particularly, if you don't understand. There are times when wooliness is almost a virtue; this turns out to be inevitable with Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?"

How would you answer that question? Each of us ought to be able to come up with a good answer, you'd think. After all, we've got Peter's response as a starting-point, and our own lives of faith to build upon it, together with 2000 years of church tradition. What more could you possibly need? But, I'd like to ask you for a moment, since we're celebrating Peter's great faith today: is his answer really the right place to start?

Look at the Gospel reading again. That passage is often said to be the turning-point in the story. Peter gives his answer, "You are the Messiah", and then the story changes direction. It starts to focus Jesus' destiny in Jerusalem, the cross and resurrection, which haven't really featured until now. The version we heard, from Matthew's Gospel, is probably the most famous, because Jesus praises Peter for his answer: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church", he begins.

But Mark and Luke's accounts are different, and much less kind to Peter. If you read Mark, probably the first account to be written, he has almost none of this. Peter answers "You are the Messiah", and Jesus strictly orders him not to tell anyone. And then he rebukes Peter for misunderstanding about the cross and resurrection, "Get behind me, Satan!", he says. Well Matthew has that bit too, eventually, but because he has an extra paragraph inbetween, praising Peter, you get a very different feel. But with Mark, you simply can't hear Peter's confession of Jesus without also hearing Jesus' rebuke of Peter, and the mysterious command to silence. You're left wondering why is Jesus so secretive? If Peter was right, why is Jesus then so hard on him? You get a much more ambiguous, enigmatic scene.

Really, if you're going to make so much of one Gospel story, you ought to hear the other sides too, which is why I've mentioned Mark, because Peter's answer isn't all there is to the story. You also need to hear Jesus saying "Get behind me, Satan!" Clearly Peter is the rock, a great pillar of faith, but like all of us flawed at the same time, and with the particular problem that he keeps leaping in without thinking, almost never understanding who Jesus really is. He simply says too much.

This shows one of the beauties of the Four Gospels: they tell the same basic story, but do it in such very different ways. Matthew makes it seem so simple. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God; Peter has it just right. Mark on the other hand makes you wonder what on earth Peter should have said. But then, Mark often does this, suggests a more mystifying, inexplicable Jesus than the others. No wonder then, that Mark's Peter can't get it quite right: he says the right title, "Messiah", (or one of the right titles), but he doesn't understand what it means. But then: which of us could hope to do any better in the same situation?

One of the subjects I teach is Patristics, the history and doctrine of the early church. The students who've been studying it with me this year, have all been looking at the early church's attempts to answer that question: "Who do you say that I am?" What does it mean to call Jesus the Messiah, Son of the living God, and Son of Man at the same time? How can he be both human and divine at the same time? "Bizarre", "ridiculous" and "irrelevant", are the kinds of comments they've made. Certainly, some of the Church Fathers tied themselves up into knots trying to say who Jesus is, and many were excommunicated and exiled for this precise reason that they tried to say too much. The whole issue wasn't settled until 451 with the Council of Chalcedon, which effectively did it by restating the mystery in clearer terms than before. My own Patristics teacher, Tom Weinandy, always used to say that if you ever think you understand who Jesus is, then you must have gone down some heretical side-road.

So what am I saying, that none of us knows who Jesus is, that Peter didn't know who he was? – this man who shared his food on countless occasions, who prayed with him, who laughed with him, who wept with him and later over him, and who courageously followed him to his own death decades later in Rome? No, of course I'm not saying that, but that is the paradox (or one of them). Because, if you're a Christian, you know exactly who Jesus is: like Peter you've met him, probably countless times, in prayer, in reading, in the bread and wine. You may not even know it or feel it a lot of the time. After all, those aren't the usual ways you meet someone. No wonder it's a mystery. But my point is that words, or titles, only get you to the turning point of the story, the first revelation. Not much further. It's important to remember that, because it forces us out of complacency, forces us to keep reaching out for understanding, for a closer faith, always just beyond our grasp. Which is why I sometimes find myself wanting to say "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.....on the other hand...."

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