

## **'Who do you say that I am?'**

*A sermon preached by Revd Canon Dr Simon Jones, Merton College Chaplain during St Peter's 2016 Patronal Service on Sunday 26 June.*

Hester lived in a bungalow round the corner from the curate's house in Tewkesbury. As one of my home communicants, I would take her the sacrament on the first Wednesday of each month. Opening the door, she would greet me on each visit as if we were strangers meeting for the first time. My cassock and collar alerted her to the purpose of my call and allowed me entry to the living room. As we passed the kitchen she would tell me that I couldn't stay for long because she was cooking lunch for her parents, and they would be home from work in half an hour. And, sure enough, the kitchen table would be set for three, with several saucepans bubbling gently on the hob.

Hester was in her seventies, her parents had in fact died almost a quarter of a century before, and yet the Alzheimer's disease with which she had lived for the past five years locked her into an unreal past identity. Our monthly conversations covered the same safe topics – her childhood in Birmingham during the Second World War, the family's move to Tewkesbury, her involvement at the Abbey. And yet, when the time came for her to take communion, the familiar pattern of prayers and devotions which had nourished her throughout her life somehow allowed the painfully confusing truth of the present moment to break into the prison of the past reality, often bringing a tear to her eye.

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At the heart of today's gospel is a crisis of identity. Peter's confession at Caesarea is unusual in many respects, not least because it is one of the relatively small number of events reported in each of the four Gospels and, as such, is a crucial turning point in their accounts of the identity of the one who reveals salvation on a cross and in an empty tomb.

Jesus' questioning of his disciples is dramatic and direct. Their first attempt at answering – 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets' - simply won't do. 'But who do you say that I am?' Jesus persists. And then comes Peter's simple and yet startling confession: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

What makes Matthew's account of Peter's confession different and distinctive compared with the other Evangelists is Jesus' response to this statement of faith. For it is only in Matthew that we find: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'. Here Jesus' words connect Peter's confession to the identity of the church and show that, for Matthew, the declaration of who Jesus is has special significance for what the church is called to be. The identities of the Saviour and of his people are inseparably linked.

So let me outline just two points of significance for us this morning. First, that the identity of the church is rooted in the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. What makes Peter and the church so special is nothing that either has earned, worked for or deserved, not their intelligence or their faithfulness or their courage or their cunning. For in ten short chapters, this same Peter will deny the one whose hidden identity he has just confessed, and we deceive ourselves if we claim the

church to be any more faithful than Peter. Nevertheless, what makes Peter and the church distinctive is that it is Jesus who gives us our identity – an identity which is rooted, lives and grows in him who is Messiah and Son of God. 'On this rock I will build my Church,' says Jesus – and that is surely cause enough for us to rejoice today.

But, then, second, and no less important, we need to remember that this startling insight about Jesus' identity is not the work of human intuition, but an act of divine revelation, it is a gift from God. In verse 17, Jesus says to Peter: 'Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'. Peter does not reason his way to the acknowledgement of who Jesus is. Sound logic could never be so foolish as to conclude that the Son of God would set his face towards Jerusalem, there to be humiliated, tortured and die a criminal's death. Such knowledge comes only as a divine gift. And what was true for Peter, the rock, is true also for us who are part of the body which stands firm upon this foundation of his God-given faith.

For a church which confesses that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God is animated by nothing less than God's grace. Our uniqueness is derived from a God who always begins the divine conversation which is the life of discipleship, who graciously initiates his self-revelation and who, in every generation, and even now never ceases to disclose to the church the truth about who Jesus is.

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For my home communicant Hester, though in many ways her lifestyle seemed to bear very little resemblance to the reality of the world in which she lived, the liveliness of her faith bore eloquent testimony that it was, indeed, God-given, God's gift: a faith which remained constant even during her illness, enabling her to catch brief glimpses of her own confusion as she opened her hands to receive God's life-giving grace in the vulnerable fragility of a tiny piece of bread: her brokenness a cause of sorrow, Christ's brokenness the source of healing.

And what about us? As we come to terms with the result of Thursday's referendum, the question 'Who do we say that we are?' is a real one for us as individuals, for local communities and, indeed, for our whole nation, as we begin to discern our identity and what it means to be British and European within the ambiguous and slowly evolving context in which we now find ourselves.

When, earlier this year, the Archbishop of Canterbury discovered that his biological father was not the man he had always thought him to be, the Archbishop said this: 'I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes.' In the weeks and months ahead, as the Church seeks to be an agent of reconciliation and hope in a time of uncertainty and change, may we not lose our confidence that, like your patron, St Peter, our primary identity is in Christ, and our eternal homeland is in heaven.

Today, on this great feast, may the prayers of St Peter assist us to define our identity first and foremost in and through the person of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God. As a parish, let me encourage you to put Peter's confession of faith at the centre of your common life; build the life of your community upon that rock, and allow everything else that you do to flow from it.

And let the faith which God has given you be celebrated and shared joyfully, confidently and compassionately in this place, that you may bring healing, hope and reconciliation to one another and to all who are broken, having the insight to see in yourselves and in others the brokenness which knows its need of God and finds healing, wholeness and unity in him.

'Who do you say that I am?' At the altar this morning, as we come face to face with our broken, risen Saviour, let ask God for the faith and insight to say with St Peter and with Hester: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.