

Romans 12.1-8; Psalm 138; Matt 16.13-20

11th Sunday after Trinity

Jesus' question to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do you say I am?" is a collective one in the sense that it is addressed to all of the disciples. It is Peter who provides the ringing answer saying, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter's understanding is that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, but importantly in Matthew's account Peter enlarges this confession by adding that Jesus is the Son of the living God.

Living God is a phrase that is often invoked at the beginning of weekday and Sunday celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Communion at Christ Church meaning that God is not simply the God of the philosophers, the God whom we can think about in abstract categories such as omniscience, omnipresence or omnipotence, but as God active and working, alive, a God in relationship in which symbolic language such as Father and Son are appropriate as they give expression to something very fundamental to our Christian understanding of God namely relationship. Furthermore God is not only a concept, but a name. The sacredness of this name means that pious Jews do not say it and have adopted all sorts of substitutes such as Lord. Fundamental to our life in community, our relationship with and to one another, is first our relationship with and to the living God. We are in relationship with one another as members of the same species wonderfully created, but we are also in relationship to one another bound together through Christ and his atoning, reconciling and saving action. We are one family under God, brothers and sisters with and to one another. To grasp this with all its force of meaning will lead to the renewing of our minds.

The unity of which the apostolic witness speaks is made clear in the reading taken from the letter to the Romans in which Paul draws on the imagery of the body. He writes,

"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in

ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

These remarks follow Paul’s admonishment “to everyone [among you] not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think”. One of the great truths of the Christian faith is that God desires for all to be bound into one great fellowship and to recognise each other (see each other), recognising each other as people of faith, bound to one another with differing gifts and abilities and each with the potential to increase their abilities according to the measure of grace we have received.

The Christian faith has seeped deeply into the soil of contemporary society. Often people are outraged morally because standards that the Christian faith upholds are still at work in secular and post-modern societies. This is good and welcome. The Gospel endures. What is too often missing amongst today’s moral outrages coming one after another is any sense of mercy any sense of forgiveness, any sense of proportion, and yes any sense of self-effacement. The new puritans often atheists and agnostics now loosed from any mooring to God and God’s enduring mercy from one generation to the next are at the gates; in truth they have already taken us captive and even numerous expressions of Christianity, but we must not despair for within Christianity there are sufficient resources, safeguards and these will endure. The Christian faith has capacity for endurance through the gift of Scripture, through attending to the Tradition of the Church with its many and dire warnings of wrong turns, through the rigours of debate and scholarship and vibrant communities accompanied by prayer and service, by thanksgiving and worship. Again and again we have to witness how Christianity is used inappropriately, is taken captive to further the agenda of this or that power group, base or interest and how easily people are misled. Again Paul’s call to the renewing of our minds is an essential endeavour. Diligence is required.

We again find ourselves in a testing time. What makes it different is that it has a global reach. It is not singular like a Tsunami, an earthquake, a drought, a civil war, and unlike global warning/climate change, take your pick, it is immediate. Like people in all ways of life, Christ Church is being deeply affected by the pandemic. Many of our usual activities have ceased or we have had or will have to adapt them. Ingenuity is required. Faithfulness is required. Now we need to call on the gifts of everyone to put their hand to the

plough. Many have not returned to church or participated in the Zoom and Facebook streams since the 15th March. Some whose attendance was already occasional have not been seen in months. Every congregation has a different mix of gifts and abilities, but each member of the body needs to nurture a desire to put these in the service of the local church of which they are members, if we do not want to hear words like “I did not know you”! Believing and belonging are tightly knit together. The rampant individualism that has taken hold and perhaps especially of the Anglican Tradition makes it harder and harder for us to have a common vision and purpose in England and in truth globally. Fragmentation must not be our lifeblood, but rather the unifying power of the Good News of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. It will require the renewing of our minds.

A Christian community is built on what God has done and is doing, which in turn gives rise to a response in the way of a confession. As the international schools in Vienna start up again on Monday and Austrian schools in two weeks, each uncertain of what the autumn and winter will bring, with anxious and some very anxious parents – in the face of all this, what confession will we make in our today? This confession will always be personal and corporate at one and the same time. And importantly, what is the content of our common confession? Is it the full confession that Peter makes at Caesarea Philippi a place of multiple ethnic identities, religious diversity and social norms concerning virtue, making it a place not so different from our own society?

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter makes this bold and wholehearted confession according to Matthew not knowing what lies ahead, the passion and the crucifixion, but at this moment he as an apprentice is confident straddling in that confession his Jewish identity and the prevailing Greek culture of Caesarea Philippi, a city dedicated to Caesar and where there was a temple dedicated to the Roman Emperor, over against which he speaks. Setting out from Caesarea Philippi with another shrine dedicated to the Greek God Pan, Peter and the other disciples can go with Jesus up to Jerusalem. In Caesarea Philippi Jesus promises Peter that on the basis of the apostolic witness, a witness to Jesus and his saving action, God will build his Church. Let us remain faithful to this witness and we as members of the Church of the Body of Christ shall prevail having our minds renewed. We will

not lose our hold on the things eternal, as we make our way through the things temporal. The gates of death, of alienation, of destruction, the gates of Hades shall not prevail. The door is open. We can go through. For being baptised into a death like Jesus', we are also baptised into a resurrection like his. Now is eternal life, if "in Christ we stand" as we often sing meaning if in Christ we are baptised, we are secure. God's work is a work of assurance. Let us take hold of it as we move gradually together, supporting one another, into the autumn and the winter this year.

Let us pray using the Collect set for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O Heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. Amen.