

Sermon - August 23rd 2020 Trinity11

Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

Amen

We all wear lots of different “hats”, don’t we? Not in the literal sense of course, but metaphorically in that we all play many different roles. We’re all sons *and* daughters. We may be husbands or wives, mothers or fathers, brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts, grandparents.... and indeed a combination of some or all of these. Apart from our families, in the wider world of work, or leisure, we have different roles again. So, when someone asks who we are, it’s sometimes difficult to give a clear-cut answer. Asked who *I* am, replying that I’m a Reader says something about me - but not all. If I introduce myself as a grandmother, that again says something, but not all. I was proud to say I was a teacher, but when I had to say I was retired, I felt a huge sense of loss. What we are, who we are is often defined by what we do.

Often, the wearing of a particular “hat” directs how we deal with people and what their response to us is. The role we play within our church family is different to the one we play within our genetic families, though there may be some similarities. The “me” our friends see is not necessarily the “me” that colleagues at work know. And, of course, the “me” that we think ourselves to be may be seen in a very different light by other people. So when people ask, “Who are you?” the answer, I guess, is that we’re the sum of all the parts.

Our concept of people affects the way we respond to them - and the same is true of Jesus. In our reading from St. Matthew’s gospel today, we hear Jesus pressing his disciples for an answer to who he is. At first he probes fairly gently - “Who do people say that I am?” In other words, he’s asking, based on all the miracles he’s worked, all the healing he’s performed and all the teaching he’s given; what do the people out there think of him? What have they understood about him? What “hat” have they given him? The reply is that they see Jesus as a messenger of God, as a prophet like Elijah and John the Baptist. They recognise that he’s a good and fearless man of God, teaching with authority, speaking out against injustice and evil and bringing hope.

The people have one view of Jesus. However, underneath, there lies another hidden dimension and Jesus’ hope is that, because the disciples have been with him intimately and for a long time, they have grasped the secret of it. His next question goes straight to the heart of the matter, “Who do you say that I am?” It

hardly seems a fair question as the disciples are demonstrating by their very presence, by all they have given up, what they believe about Jesus. It seems that at last they have understood all the signs and their eyes have been opened. In fact, the disciples weren't expecting a divine redeemer, they were longing for a king, a final heir to the throne of David. This is what they meant by the term "messiah" and this is what they thought they had found in Jesus. The disciples' recognition of Jesus was as the true king of Israel, one who was to establish an earthly kingdom. This politically and theologically challenging claim put Jesus in jeopardy--- from the religious hierarchy, from Herod and from the might of the Roman authorities. It was a risky and dangerous "hat" they were giving him to wear.

Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" and, suddenly, Peter answers — "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" Peter is saying that it is not enough to believe he is important and like the other prophets. Jesus is the key to the whole of God's relationship with his created world, and his kingdom is not an earthly one. By introducing a new way of being God's appointed and anointed king, Jesus is giving the dream of a Messiah a face-lift, a new-look "hat", which requires a totally new response from all his followers.

As Peter recognises Jesus, so Jesus recognises Peter and gives him the "hat" by which he'll be known for evermore. Simon the fisherman is to become Cephas, Peter, the rock, upon whom the church will be built. This flawed, impetuous, rather loud man is transformed because he has recognised the work of God when he sees it, as it is manifested in Jesus.

Jesus asks us the same question - who do we say that Jesus is? What hat do we give him? He was without doubt a real historical figure, a great human teacher, whose humanity, compassion and love provide an example for living which many follow, regardless of whether or not they are "religious". If that's all we say that he is, that's good - but is no different from other great men and women. Think of all the names we have for him: the good shepherd, the light of the world, our Lord, the Saviour, Emmanuel - the list goes on. All of these titles, these "hats", may have slightly different shades of meaning, so that we may feel more comfortable to use some than others. Gentle Jesus who embraced the children seems at odds with the man who scattered the money-lenders in the Temple. The patient healer is easier to look at than the agonised figure on the cross. We also speak of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit - the trinity which is one; again the truth is that we may find it easier to relate to one of these images in particular and so rather tend to ignore the others.

Yet we need to understand that we can't own one or two of these faces. We can't choose which hat we want Jesus to wear. Like the disciples, we must

recognise him as the Messiah, the Christ. We acknowledge his divinity and his humanity, his gentleness and his power, his joy and his agony. When he asks of us “Who do you say that I am?” we must recognise him as God’s Son, whose kingdom is on earth and in heaven. At this point, we begin to understand how all the parts that we see combine into a whole entity, greater than anything else we know, have known or will know. At this point, when we recognise the work of God in Jesus, we, like Peter, are transformed and enabled to fulfil our roles in the continuance of the church.

As Jesus says to us today, “Who do you say that I am?”, let’s respond with conviction and with joy... “You are our Messiah, the Son of God”.