

Reflection on Matthew 16. 13-20. (For 23-08-2020) By Rev'd Peter Shaw

Our reading today brings two points to my mind; firstly that Christ is no longer on this earth and so He is relying on us to spread the Good News of the Gospels and secondly He often uses the most unlikely people to carry out this task.

Looking further at the first point, in our reading we hear about Jesus asking His disciples who they think He really is. Some of their answers are quite interesting; they mention the great prophets of the past, prophets like John the Baptist, Elijah and even Jeremiah. These answers give us food for thought because they give an indication of what Jesus may have been like as a person, how he was perceived by those who met Him and indeed knew Him; not all the time “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”, not the cosy image we sometimes see of Him, but rather, like one of the “wild” prophets of the past who had stood up to be counted and had spoken God’s word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious Kings. Jesus was acting not only as a prophet, one who simply foretold the future but one who was God’s mouthpiece against wickedness and injustice in high places. A classic example of this is when he overturned the moneylenders’ tables in the Temple, an incident referred to in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John

Wickedness and injustice in high places – how familiar is that situation to us today?!

Today Jesus is no longer on this earth and it is down to good and well intentioned people and that most certainly should involve Christians, to stand up and be counted against such wickedness of which there is still much today. It brings to my mind the quote of St Teresa of Avila, a copy of which I carry around in my wallet:

“Christ has no body now but yours.
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
 Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
 Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes,
 you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

On to my second point and coming back to the question Jesus asks His disciples, who do they think He really is. The disciples mention Elijah, John the Baptist and Jeremiah. But then Peter says: ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ The other disciples may have shared Peter’s insight but he, true to character, expressed it.

Jesus then responds: ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And 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.’ Peter has declared who Jesus really is and now Jesus reveals in turn where Peter stands in the working out of God’s purpose – he is to lead the future Church after Christ has left this

earth. Peter is frequently portrayed in Matthew's Gospel as a leader, a spokesman for the rest of the disciples and now Jesus is conferring on him, the leadership of God's church on earth once Jesus has ascended into Heaven.

But what of Peter, what qualifications had he to take on this huge vitally important task? He was a fisherman, not educated, given to impulsive behaviour, frequently got things wrong as in Matthew 16.22 when Jesus turns on him and says "Get behind me Satan" and certainly not "rock like" as we see in Matthew 26.74 when he denies having known Jesus. So really, on the face of it, he was not suitably qualified to take on the leadership of God's church. Yet, somewhere beneath this rough and ready exterior with all the frailties of human nature, there dwelt a person of Faith, who eventually died for his Faith, according to early Church tradition by crucifixion at the time of the Great Fire of Rome in the year 64AD, which was blamed by the Emperor Nero on the Christians,

So to summarise, what can we learn from all this that is relevant to us today?

Firstly that Jesus is not here anymore in the flesh and is relying on us as Christians to carry out God's will and radiate His love and compassion in a world which is so desperately in need of it.

Secondly, we don't have to be superhuman to do it. Peter was a very flawed human being, yet God chose him to lead His church on earth. Certainly Peter had witnessed Jesus' Resurrection and that clearly had a major impact on his Faith and as one of my very good friends with whom I trained with for Ordination put it: "How many marks out of ten would you give St Peter before the Resurrection and then after it?" We sadly haven't witnessed the event surrounding the Resurrection but we have Holy Scripture to tell us of these events and we also have prayer through which we have a sense of God working in our lives, although at times our faith can be seriously challenged.

So, we must always be prayerfully attentive to what God is calling us to do in His world and as He is no longer present on earth to do it – He relies on working through us!

Amen