

## Reflection for Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August – Pentecost 13 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

A question of identity - Who is the Son of man? Who really is Jesus? And what difference did & does the answer to the question make?

The whole question of identity and how we are perceived is important an important one. It affects our status and stature, confidence, and self-belief. It may also define our role and our place within in society. To know who you are or how others perceive you to be is important.

Think of politicians and the way there seem to be constant barrage of polls coming out, not just about which party we might vote for at the next election, but also about the approval rating of the party leaders and key figures.

The same is true, though on a much smaller scale, closer to home.

We must all have been to a parties or social events where the first question asked of, or to a stranger is. What do you do? By establishing the persons job you are going a long way, towards establishing the person's identity. From that point on a relationship can be built.

The same idea, of building on perceived identity, lies at the heart of our gospel reading.

The way Peter and the other disciples answered the identity question “*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*” would tell Jesus how far he had got in terms of teaching & revealing who he really was and what his work and mission were about. I suppose in modern terms we would say Jesus is looking for feedback.

It was to be a pivotal moment in the life and discipleship of Peter and the other disciples as the focus of Jesus' activity is about to shift towards Jerusalem and his Passion.

Let me highlight three important things from this encounter.

Firstly, its setting. Where would you expect Jesus' identity to be revealed first, in a clear and unambiguous way? At Jerusalem, or by the lake of Galilee? But no, Jesus has travelled north, twenty-five miles north of Galilee, into the foothills of Mt Hermon in search of peace. to a place where he will not be recognised and a place where he can teach his disciples in privacy without his every word being overheard by those outside the group.

There is, though, something fascinating about Jesus' choice of the place and the backdrop against which he asks the key questions to his disciples about his identity. It is a place that in many ways symbolises new beginnings.

Caesarea Philippi or as it is now known by its more ancient name Banias, has three main claims to fame: (1) Herod the Great, the master builder of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC, began reconstructing it with his son Philip, completing the work and re-naming it in honour of Caesarea. So, it was a new Roman centre and not Jewish (2) It was reputed in ancient pagan thinking to be the birthplace of the god Pan - the most famous of the fertility symbols. And even today you can still see the remains of the temple to Pan. (3) Thirdly and in Christian terms more importantly, it is one of the sources of the river Jordan - the place where the water breaks surface close to the temple of Pan. The Jordan, that symbolises so much about baptism, about cleansing, washing, and renewing, begins its flow here.

And it is here in this place that Jesus asks his question; not surrounded by those of a Jewish background, but in a centre of paganism. It is here that Peter makes the first Christian profession of faith.

And as we reflect, this morning, on the place of Peters profession I wonder if it does not challenge each of us to in our own mission. When we share and challenge others with the message of the gospel, where do we do it? Is it only in church?

Yet, here is Jesus against a very worldly backdrop staking his claim to be the Son of God, the Christ. Are there times when we need to step back from the normal the routine to be challenged anew and afresh.

Secondly, look at the replies given by the disciples.

"Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." A prophet, a teacher, yes some may call me those Jesus replies "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter sees not just the carpenter turned teacher as his master and rabbi but with remarkable insight, see Jesus as the Messiah, the one who will save his people, the very Son of God. He is seeing with the eye of faith, but does Peter fully understand what he has just said? That is debatable.

Here again lies an important insight into our own mission and witness for Christ. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." As hard as we may struggle to spread the message of the gospel, through word and deed. We must never forget that the mission is not ours but God's and it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit at work that people's hearts and lives can be changed.

We are simply the tool God uses. If we try to minister in our own strength and power the result will be failure. It is the Holy Spirit that convicts and changes lives.

The third thing to draw from this passage is that Peter, despite his great moment of insight and Christ's promise to build his church upon the rock of Peter's faith, seems to have understood so very little of what it meant in reality.

If you read on to verses 21-23 beyond the point our gospel reading ended.

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

How often are we like Peter? The moment our faith becomes real is not the end of the journey it is simply the beginning; we still have to struggle to understand the reality of Christ in our lives. So often, like Peter, we get things wrong. Christian discipleship as Peter discovered through pain, struggle, denial, and God's love is a journey of faith and exploration.

Each of us should be looking to grow and develop. So that we become more Christ like and understand more fully his reality in our lives and in our mission.

To do that involves time and effort, looking and learning together with God's help. But the key is that we should all be looking to grow. As you look at the life and development of Peter you see that time and again new thing that he had to learn and come to terms with. From acknowledging Christ, then being rebuked he grows into one of the key leaders of the early church. Yet even there he still has much to learn.

I wonder if Jesus was to take you or me aside this morning and ask us the question "Who do you say that I am?" what would our answer be? Would we echo the words of Peter "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And if we do are we prepared for the reality of what that means in terms of our lives, even if we do not at first fully understand what those words mean?