

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 21 Year A 2023

In the history of mankind, occasionally a word or a phrase will be uttered that echoes down the centuries. We might think of some of the great speeches in which a simple phrase has such powerful resonance that it continues to be remembered and to inspire. Think of Martin Luther King's evocative, *I have a dream*, which so galvanized the civil rights movements in 1960s America. Or Churchill's speech of June 1940, *We shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender*. Or from John F Kennedy's inaugural address, *ask not what the country can do for you but what you can do for the country*. Or even Elizabeth I in 1588 inspiring her navy about to face the Spanish armada, *I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king*.

In lists of top speeches from history, Our Lord's own so-called Sermon on the Mount rightly figures. Now of course, as people of faith, we will want to say that *every* word from Our Lord is memorable and to be taken seriously. The gospel text placed before us today presents us with not much an ethical saying of our Lord, or a witty phrase, or even something particularly inspiring. But he does present us with a question. And it is a question that, like the great speeches of history, echoes through the ages. We might even say it haunts the ages and reverberates through the centuries. And the question: *Who do men say that I am?*

The response to the question we hear in today's gospel is likewise memorable and notable. Peter, in a unique moment of clarity and insight answers, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. To which our Lord responds by saying, *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church*. In these two statements, we hear Peter declaring something of Christ's identity and Our Lord declaring something about Peter's identity. The two of course belong together. What Jesus says about Peter is dependent on what Peter says about Jesus. In response to that key and terrible question - *who do men say that I am?* – Peter shows his faith that Jesus is both the long-promised and long-hoped Messiah of God, *and* that he is the Son of God. It is precisely *upon* this confession, this insight, that Christ lay upon Peter his solemn charge and mission. It is not so much Peter as an individual upon which the church is built, but his faith. Yes, this faith, this confession will have a real and concrete expression in Peter. But essentially, the church is founded and built upon a confession, a confession of who

Jesus is. All this to say, the response to the question, who do people say that I am, has real consequence on how we answer. The church cannot be the church if it gets the answer wrong. And Christians cannot be Christians if we get the answer wrong.

This question, then, is not simply addressed to Peter, but to us! This is why it is a question that echoes through the ages. It is addressed to you and me and to all people of all ages: *who do people say that I am?* And, to make it more personal: *who do you say that Jesus is?* Of course, the point of today's gospel text is that the faithful follower of Jesus will simply and confidently answer that question with Peter's very words. Peter, in this instance, represents Every Disciple, Every Faithful Follower.

But as we know, that is certainly not the only way of responding to the question. The gospel text already indicates that there has always been a variety of ways in which people have responded to the person of Jesus Christ. *Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.* In other words, some people were responding to Jesus through categories (and people) they knew in an attempt to make sense of the Jesus Question. But those categories were all insufficient. And because they were insufficient, they led to wrong conclusions. But that same pattern continues to this day. People take categories known and familiar, apply them to Jesus, but end up with wrong conclusions. And again, this is why this question echoes through the ages, why it haunts the centuries. Because it is challenging and confronting and the answer has consequences. And one way to avoid the consequence is to apply a faulty category.

A popular misconception from a familiar category is that Jesus was simply a good, wise man, comparable to other wise religious figures such as Buddha, Mohammad, Moses or Confucius. According to this, Jesus was simply one who imparts ethical wisdom. Another popular approach to the Jesus Question is to say that precisely because he was a religious figure, he was misguided and dangerous! In a strange way, the fundamentalist atheists who hold this view are in agreement with the religious opponents from Jesus' own day. Others still will respond by saying that Jesus is a nobody and nothing, that despite the overwhelming historical evidence pointing to the truth of his existence, he never existed, and that it is all a made-up fairy story. Again, a very popular response to the question, one that has a great deal of currency in our cultural context. But it just goes to show that for all the weight given to evidence it can all be discarded in a most prejudiced way when it comes to matters of religion.

Importantly, Peter's confession is *distinct* from that of the crowds. That is why it is so commendable. So too, we must make *our* confession distinct from that of the crowds. It should not surprise us that those outside the church, those who do not share our faith, should have different, strange, and (to be frank) wrong ideas about Jesus. The Gospel text today suggests as much. Peter's insight is God-given. It is, we are told, a revelation. And the body that preserves and guards, imparts and passes on this revelation is the church. But it does mean that the church must do that! It must preserve and guard, impart and pass on! And, what's more, to protect it from violation.

And yet, it is remarkable how insidious the temptation to look elsewhere, as if Peter's confession was somehow deficient! So often, even in the church, there are those who seek to supplement the faith or diminish it; those who seek to embellish it with syncretic beliefs, or to ignore its uniqueness. It is surely one of the most effective strategies of the devil to make us think there might well be some truth, some insight, something missing in Christianity but found elsewhere. It reveals itself in a number of ways. In our context, it might show itself through something as seemingly innocuous as a sly reading of a horoscope, placing a statue of Buddha on the front porch, or hanging a dream catcher on the kitchen window. More explicitly, the consulting of mediums and such. Or adopting the practices or beliefs of other religious traditions, now increasingly neo-pagan under the mask of environmentalism. Then there is adopting the flavour-of-the-month political issue, so favoured by liberal Christianity. But all these just go to show we do not truly trust Christ, that Peter's God-given confession is somehow insufficient, and that Christ is not enough. None of them give saving insights. None of them give greater insight than that found in Christianity. All of them deceive us if we think they improve in the truth found in Jesus.

Peter's answer to Jesus' question *Who do men say that I am?* shows, in fact, that *Jesus is enough*. It is a question that continues to reverberate to our own time. And it is asked of you as surely as it is asked of me. But we can know the answer. For those who look at the record of scripture, for those who examine the gospels and its insights, for those who study the life of the saints and the story of the church, and for those who know and have encountered Christ in their own lives, can truly have the confidence to answer with Peter, *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. And nothing needs to be taken from that. Nothing needs to be added to it. That answer is enough. Amen.