

From Rock to Bothersome Boulder: Matthew 16.13-28

Trinity 11 St Marylebone 11 am 2017

Rock

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now in its 14th series, the BCC's *Who do you think you are?* describes itself as a "series in which celebrities trace their ancestry, discovering secrets and surprises from their past". The show regularly attracts more than 6 million viewers and has been replicated in a dozen or so other countries.

Today's Gospel is not so much *Who do you think you are?* but, *Who do you think I am?*

The Roman town of Caesarea Philippi was built by Philip the Tetrarch in the foothills of Mount Hermon at a junction on the road to Damascus.

At the time of its building the town was carefully situated around a cave from which one of the tributaries of the River Jordan flowed.

At the entrance to this cave Philip built a temple to Caesar and to the river god Pan. Carved into in the walls of the rock were niches where the statues of Roman and local gods were placed in their hundreds, if not thousands.

And so it was that Jesus brought his disciples to this polytheistic city stocked with myriads of images and statues to ask them the \$64,000 question: *Who do you think I am?*

The disciples have no choice but to nail their colours to the mast and come up with an answer.

To play for time, they toy with what others have said: *'John the Baptist'* or *'Elijah'*, perhaps.

But it is Peter, big, brash, foot-in-mouth, impetuous Peter, who comes up with the correct answer: *You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One!*¹

Here, at Caesarea Philippi, the heart of the Gospel message is revealed and proclaimed: Jesus not a returned Elijah, not even a reincarnated John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One!

¹ cf Mark 8.29

Any shilly-shallying, any doubt or confusion, any tentative guesses now have no place: Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited One!

As the shekel drops, the disciples standing in front of the temples to Caesar and Pan, at the foot of the enormous stone cliffs, hear Jesus saying that he will, upon Peter's rock-solid confession of faith, now build his Church.

As we walk with Jesus through life, Jesus asks *us* the *same* question that he once asked his disciples: *Who do you say that I am?*

Perhaps we have never really given the question much thought.

Perhaps we have struggled with the question but have never come up with a satisfying answer.

Perhaps we have never realised that the question is not abstract or rhetorical, but a really important the-answer-to-this-question-changes-everything type of question that is addressed personally to each us and that demands an answer from us.

So, *Who is Jesus for you?*

Is Jesus the best-among-many other examples of a good life lived?

Is he perhaps an insightful prophet, who stands out over and above all the other insightful prophets who have graced the pages of history?

Is Jesus someone who has reflected most brightly in his living and teaching and dying on earth that which we call 'God'?

Or, is Jesus, for *you*, as he was for Peter, "*the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One*"?

For, if Jesus is *the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One*, not only does Jesus show us what it means to be good and to reflect the divine, Jesus *is* the divine, the Very God of Very God, the One who has chosen to set aside his place at the heart of the Trinity in order to become one with us and who shows us God's face; the One who chooses, freely and lovingly, to enter "*into his creation, its dimensions of time and space, its physicality, its chronology, its life, its set of interrelationships and constraints*",² in order that he might make his home

² Cafe Theology, M Lloyd, p. 133,

here among-us-and-with-us and, by so doing, offer *us* a share in the eternal Godhead.

This is the truth which Peter had come to realise, and it is what Peter shouts out to those who have walked with him on the road to Caesarea Philippi.

In time, it was not only Peter who came to know who Jesus was.

Gradually, painfully, fitfully, the other disciples eventually caught-on too, and through them countless millions of others, through two thousand years, have caught-on as well.

On his way through life, with Jesus by his side, Peter not only discovered who Jesus was, but who *Peter* was!

In time Peter - and the other disciples - discovered through knowing Jesus that those who want to save their lives first have to lose them, and that those who do so for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of his Gospel, are the ones who will be saved.

May each of us, clearly hear Jesus' question: *Who do you think I am?* – for it is addressed to us! And, with Peter, may we have the courage and the grace to shout out: *You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's*

Chosen One! and, in so doing, may we come to find life in its fullest and richest abundance. Amen.

Trinity 12 St Marylebone 11 am

Bothersome Boulder

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we reflected together on Simon Peter's great statement of Faith that Jesus was,

*the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One!*ⁱ

Today, we seem to have entered something of a parallel universe in which Jesus quickly turns on Peter and likens him to a satanic trip hazard!ⁱⁱ

Within just seven verses and with Jesus' words that he will be '*handed the keys of the kingdom of heaven*' still ringing in his ears, Peter moves from being the '*rock*' upon which Christ will establish the Church to being nothing more than a bothersome and perilous boulder that the devil has put in Jesus' way.

It is all too easy for us to say, *'well that's Peter for you, isn't it? Forever blowing hot and cold; Peter the fickle, uncertain fishermen, blundering into yet another encounter with Jesus'*.

But we need to read on, for Jesus goes on to say:

'If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

Matthew does not record this extraordinary encounter between Peter and Jesus simply to humble or belittle the chief apostle, but to challenge all who read or hear the Gospel message the Evangelist sets down.

We *all* blow hot and cold; it is not just Peter who is fickle or uncertain; it is not just Peter who can, all too easily, move from profound religious insight to crass stupidity; it is not just Peter who blunders his way through life trying to establish and sustain a positive and creative relationship with Jesus.

This is a story for us all to hear.

Which of us, if we are truly honest with ourselves can say that we are always on the side of the angels? Always get it right? Always understand what Jesus asks us to do as his disciples?

Matthew's message is clear: following Jesus is not going to be easy; following Jesus is costly, for it means setting aside self – in order to find oneself; laying down one's life in order to live the life of God's Kingdom; pitting oneself against the world rather than succumbing to its false attractions; dying to sin and darkness and death in order to live the new life of Christ's Resurrection.

Some bible commentatorsⁱⁱⁱ have suggested that Matthew's Gospel was written as a kind of handbook or primer to be used with those who were preparing for baptism.

If this was the case, then Matthew sets out the Christian 'stall' pretty comprehensively: *'if you are going to go in for this Christianity-thing, then go into it with your eyes wide open'*, he seems to say, *'even the great St Peter found the going pretty tough'!*

It is not 'always getting it right', however, which is the hallmark of a true Christian, but bearing the cross faithfully, and perhaps the only assurance that one *is* doing so is being brought face-to face daily with how much we fail to do this; how far short we fall in our attempts to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

But it is only by having the courage and self-awareness to acknowledge our weakness that we can hope to find God's strength; only by being honest with ourselves about our faithlessness, that we will know just how faithful God is; only when we acknowledge that we cannot even 'pick up' the cross let alone 'carry' it by relying on our own strength, that we can be open to receive Christ's grace.

St Paul put it like this^{iv},

The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'

Great Saint Peter, Peter the Rock, with the best of human intention, wanted Jesus to take another route, a less arduous, less dangerous route, to follow another way, a way that would *not* inevitably lead to an ignominious and brutal death on Calvary; so Jesus forcefully reminds him that such a way would not be God's way. That God's way, the way of perfect love, was the way of Calvary, the way of the Cross, the hard way of obedience; the only way that could lead humanity beyond the death of Calvary to the new life of the Resurrection.

May God give us grace to follow Jesus; to rely on God's strength and grace alone; grace not to be defeated by our failure to follow Jesus faithfully, but to have the confidence to acknowledge our shortcomings and rest in God's love; to know the joy of doing God's will, of following where Christ leads – and finding that way to be the way home into God's eternal and all-sufficient love.

ⁱ Matthew 16.16 cf Mark 8.29

ⁱⁱ Matthew 16.23

ⁱⁱⁱ Scaer, D., Discourses in Matthew, Jesus teaches the Church, 2004

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 12.9-10