

**ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020: Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Readings: Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20**

**Key message: The freedom offered by Christ is the foundation of the church and gives each of us our identity.**

Last week Richard said that Jesus was not afraid to be political. In our gospel passage today, he's being especially political. He came into the district of Caesarea Philippi and asked his disciples about who people thought he was. The fact he was in Caesarea Philippi at the time is significant. Herod the Great's son, Philip, had established this city as the place where he'd rule the land in the east of Galilee from, whilst remaining a puppet of the Romans. Naming it after both the Roman Emperor, Caesar (who was thought by the Romans to be God), and himself, (the king of the Jews in that area), made this city a place where Jesus would be in conflict with both the Romans and the Jewish ruling classes, were he to be recognised as the Messiah (the Son of God and King of the Jews).

So, it's on his entry into this place that he asks his disciples 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' and 'Who do you say that I am?'. When Peter answers that he believes Jesus to be 'Messiah', Jesus recognises that this revelation hasn't come from any human being – it is surely God-inspired. The reason for this is that anyone openly declaring Jesus as 'Messiah' ran the risk of being imprisoned. It was dangerous talk, as it ran counter to both the idea of Caesar being God and Philip being king. Peter is showing signs of thinking in a way that turns the world upside down. It's this revelation (that Jesus is the Messiah) which Jesus himself says he will build his church on (v18). The church of today is built on those people, like Peter, who, through the ages, have believed this revelation to be true. The

buildings of church are purely a symbol. They are a symbol of all those people who meet in that place, and elsewhere, and who work together to do things (often radical, political things) in the name of Christ. It is the people who make up the church.

So, Jesus was political. Peter was beginning to get the message and be political. And the church, the people of God, are also called to be political. This is exactly what Paul was asking the Romans to be when he says in his letter (in v2 of the first reading) 'Do not be conformed to the ways of this world if you are to discern the will of God'.

I don't see myself as political in a worldly sense, but I can see how not being conformed to this world does call me to be political, if I'm to prioritise all those things that Christ taught his disciples about. Those things that Richard talked about last week - equality, compassion and speaking about justice for the poor and the oppressed. This is political.

Let's look at how this being political might affect us as the church and as individuals through our identity. If I was asked who I was, I might reply that my identity is multi-faceted – a wife, a mother, a vicar. If I see these identities from a worldly approach, I become driven and bound by what's generally seen as success and what others expect. Politics in a worldly sense is geared towards everyone working to create success in the system. This binds us to a particular way of behaving. For example, as a mother, I want my children to do well, to meet someone that they'd like to settle down with, to remain healthy. And so, I insist on hard work at school, I organise wholesome out of school activities and take them to meet up with friends. And all these things are good, but why am I encouraging them? Is it because that's what's expected by others (by the

system), but I see it (and maybe my children also see it) as a bind? Or is it because I find my identity in Christ and I can see that making the most of opportunities that come our way and following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit will enable me to show my children that they are loved by God and can be inspired by the Holy Spirit? There's a freedom in deciding to work hard at school as a result of responding to God's love and finding our calling in life through the experiences that we gain, rather than that's what's expected by the system.

As a Christian, I can find an identity in being a mother, but combining this with my identity in Christ, I'm a mother who's freed up to love my children, so that they know themselves as children of God, with hope for the future, always on the look out for opportunities. They are not bound by what others might think of them and what the system sees as success. And they too have the potential to be freed of the stresses of this world. Finding one's identity in Christ means that we know ourselves to be saved. Saved from being bound to particular ways of behaving, through Christ's death and resurrection, which shows us how much God loves us.

I wonder where you find your identity. If you were asked the question 'Who are you?', what would the response be? Is it tied up with the systems of this world – I'm a mother, a wife, a vicar and I'm working for the success (in worldly terms) of my family and church? Or can you allow Christ to transform you to see yourself as a child of God, saved by Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit to be a servant of all?

Jesus is political. He knows his identity as Messiah and he's not afraid of acting to show how this identity operates in a way that's counter to the ways of the world, such as healing the Canaanite

woman's daughter, as we saw last week. But Jesus also knows that shouting this message about his identity from the rooftops is a dangerous thing to do and so he tells his disciples not to tell anyone. He doesn't allow himself to be bound by the ways of this world, but he also doesn't antagonise the ruling classes.

If we are really part of the church, built on the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, then we have to be political and prioritise the equality, compassion and justice that Richard was talking about last week. We might not be shouting about it from the rooftops, but we do need to free ourselves from the ways of this world and allow our identity in Christ to drive our behaviours – in our own lives and in our community – in a quietly political way.

Amen

### **Prayer Pointers**

Pray that we at St Mary's and St Francis may find our identity as radical disciples – rooted in equality, compassion and justice for all. May we find courage to speak out for those whose voice is suppressed or ignored and not be afraid to counter the culture of our day.

Thank God for the gifts he has showered upon us to use for his glory in the worship in our two churches. For preachers, intercessors, lesson readers and all others who make our services flow smoothly and effectively. We especially thank God for all those who work quietly behind the scenes keeping in touch with the congregation during lockdown and continue to care for those who are unable to worship with us at the moment.

For all those who have received 'A' level and GCSE results this month - for those for whom this is a defining moment in their lives. We

pray for those going on to University and other Higher Education and for those leaving education to enter the job market. We pray that they may find fulfilling careers in the future.

Continue to pray for those who have lost their jobs as a result of the Covid19 crisis, especially those who face eviction from their rented homes or are forced to use food banks. For all who work with the unemployed especially those in Job Clubs. We hold before God those who assist the unemployed with debt counselling, especially those who work through the Christians Against Poverty organisation.

For those who are ill at this time especially for those who are suffering depression or other mental illness as a result of the Covid 19 lockdown. Pray for all those who support them – our local GP's and mental health support services. Pray for those who are coping with bereavement that they may find comfort in the loving arms of Christ.