

READINGS AND REFLECTION FOR SUNDAY 23 AUGUST 2020
11th Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 138

1 I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; ♦
before the gods will I sing praise to you.

2 I will bow down towards your holy temple and praise your name,
because of your love and faithfulness; ♦
for you have glorified your name
and your word above all things.

3 In the day that I called to you, you answered me; ♦
you put new strength in my soul.

4 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, ♦
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

5 They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, ♦
that great is the glory of the Lord.

6 Though the Lord be high, he watches over the lowly; ♦
as for the proud, he regards them from afar.

7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you will preserve me; ♦
you will stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies;
your right hand will save me.

8 The Lord shall make good his purpose for me; ♦
your loving-kindness, O Lord, endures for ever;
forsake not the work of your hands.

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Romans 12.1-8

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16.13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 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. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Reflection – this week, from Hannah

It's a simple question, but a seismic one- 'Who do you say that I am?' In this week's reading, Peter has the answer- it's a moment of brilliance, of enormous consequence, and a question for us all.

Peter's confession of Christ takes place in the area around Caesarea Philippi. Why? Well, some writers have suggested that it is a remote place, away from the madding crowd- perhaps enabling Peter and the other disciples to get a different perspective, to make their thoughts bigger, more daring. I was once invited into Rowan Williams' house to use the toilet (it's a long story!), and noticed the high ceiling in his study. I said to the friend I was with, with great confidence (!) 'I'd be able to think like him if I had that much space above my head'. Joking aside, our surroundings matter, and maybe Jesus' friends were able to see him more clearly without the distractions and bustle they were used to.

Others have suggested that even though the group was only in the region of it, naming Caesarea Philippi was important because it was a place dedicated to both pagan gods, and to the Roman Empire - a place of other creeds, other priorities, other stories. There, surrounded by mighty, shiny, impressive symbols and tributes to false idols, Peter cut through our illusions with the glorious truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God.

Both connotations are helpful - in our lives we can find it hard to find space, and the daily pressures from all sorts of quarters can tempt us away from truth. If it were today, I wonder where Jesus might take us to ask that question - 'Who do you say that I am?' Where are those places that proclaim other ideas about meaning, and remove God from the centre? Do we hear it in the gym, in the supermarket, shopping on the internet...? Amidst the noise of competing ideologies, we are invited, like Peter, to consider the significance of Jesus Christ.

But, to say 'You are the Messiah' is a risky thing. The words have power, and they have consequences. It's not just nice for Peter to know he came up with a good answer- in response to what he says, Jesus says that Peter will be the rock upon which his church will be built. Wow! So, Peter discovers something about himself. It's a familiar pattern - when we respond to Christ's question 'Who do you say that I am?' with a confession of faith, we discover who we truly are. Our identity is bound up in him. In just the same way, that matters profoundly in a world where other narratives try to define us. Sadly, these last few weeks have seen exam chaos for A-Level, BTEC and GCSE students - but those letters and numbers do not define them, their true identity is in Christ. In all our lives we often carry labels, roles, names - when they change or are lost, we can feel that the very essence of who we are is threatened. In the age of the algorithm, we can even be reduced to codes and types, categorised on the basis of our Tesco Clubcard profile! But none of that defines us - our identity is in Christ, and in recognising him, we find ourselves.