

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 11 (23 August)

Matthew 16:13-20

"Can you keep a secret? I really shouldn't say anything, but. You'll never believe what I saw! Guess what I've just heard. Don't tell a soul, but." And so on – phrases, I suspect, many of us have used over the years when sharing some extremely tasty bits of news – or gossip – with another. We can be desperate to reveal all, and yet know we probably should not, but here we go ...

Knowing something about someone that is private and confidential is, on the other hand, a privilege to be part of. We have gained their friendship at a far deeper level than mere acquaintance; they feel secure in the knowledge that their news is safe in our hands; they often benefit from sharing whatever it might be. Playing the role of confidant is an honourable task – and certainly not one that should be betrayed by tittle-tattle and gossip.

Inevitably, many of us have, I am quite sure, been let down by so-called friends. You have shared, you have revealed, you have rendered – and then you have been exposed. Suddenly, the world at large knows whatever it is to know. You feel hurt and betrayed. You feel angry. You learn your lesson: keep everyone at arm's length, and say nothing to no one.

The emotion of sharing is a complex being. It includes both vulnerability but also strength. It allows for a new freedom to set in, a new rapport to be established. A new hope to be planted. Close, intimate, valued friendships are the life-blood of survival – and learning the art of discerning such becomes an on-going feature of many of our lives. Betrayal is never far away, but thankfully deep-seated love is often closer.

Our extract from Matthew's Gospel today contains a view of similar mixed emotions, and they lie at the core of its message. There is negotiation, there is statement, there is curiosity, there is revelation. There is a reality, and there is a hope – and all of it circulates around the notion of faith and its developing evolution. If the disciples had acted all dumb and stupid and ignored Jesus' probing lead, chances are the story would have gone nowhere, but in reacting and responding as they do, we gain a glimpse of where the root of our relationship with Him might lay.

What starts off as a mere passing and somewhat abstract conversation turns into an intimate revelation. Going about their daily business, meandering around the streets of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus says, "Oh, by the way, what have you heard about this 'Son of Man' idea? What are people saying?" No reference to Himself, no indication of such. So the disciples say, "Well, he might be X or Y or Z, there's a bit of a mixed-bag of thought. Our guess is that no one's really got any idea!" He could be John the Baptist, he could be Elijah, he could even be a prophet just like Jeremiah. He could, for all we know, be Father Christmas!

Undeterred, Jesus then asks, "OK, but what about you lot, how would you define 'Son of Man' if asked?" And He says it very differently, for this time He roots His question in the stark reality of His own self, "Who do you say I am?" You and I, not they or them out there. You, you the friends I have

gathered around me; you the people who have seen certain things, heard intimate chat, witnessed revealing moments – who am I in your eyes? This question is not merely for the disciples of first-century Palestine, it can be aimed at us: who am I, and who do you say I am?

And Peter, the assumed leader of this particular gang, says, "Well now, you're everything we've ever believed in; you are everything we've ever hoped for; you are the ultimate prize." You are IT, capital 'I', capital 'T'! No hesitation, no doubt – whatever had preceded this moment in the chronology of Matthew's writing, Peter at least appears to have got the message – a message history has yearned for every generation to get – a message we who are gathered in the present day are living proof of – a message that says, "Here is God", with 'here' being the optimal word. Not 'over there' or 'somewhere else', but 'here', here lying at the heart of who we actually are. Here in the reality of this moment in time. Here hopefully in all the moments that will follow. Intimate, real, embracing and true. Here for all time.

"A Living God!" Peter exclaims, and rightly so, for what we are looking for in our faith is that core strength that forever reminds us that a power far greater than our imagination could create is directing and nurturing the very soul that lies at that root. Our faith says: vitality, energy, encouragement, hope. Our faith says, "Here it all is, and here we hope it will stay."

Peter's revelation is ours to share in. It came not from wandering the streets of Palestine any more than it would come from those here in North Camp. It came from the heart that had been captured by inspiration through the presence of Christ. His persona had prevailed upon the lives once lived, and now those lives were forever renewed. Our hope is that such a sensation constantly recharges us; that when we allow the Spirit of Christ to envelop so we become reflections of Peter's enthusiasm – and the text hints that if such happens, then much more will be promised. Our journey through faith will move on, and by it we will hopefully grow the stronger for it. Who can tell what is around the corner? Who can say what lies ahead, regardless of planning? Who can know?

What we can and do know is that Christ's eternal promise to His followers resonates the same today as it has always done. His passing conversation on that day in Caesarea Philippi kick-started a vital dimension to understanding of who He truly was and is – and in Peter's reaction our voices can echo. You are that 'church' which is promised, you hold the 'key' to its progress, future and identity – and you fulfil all by your total conviction that the Spirit of the Living God reigns supreme. Take no notice of the last line of Matthew's work – do not keep quiet, do not turn it all into hearsay and gossip, do not whisper it in darkened corners – instead, reflect, respond and shout as loud as you can! That will keep all that is living alive.

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