

Service for 27.8.23 (St Thomas's Matt 16 13-20, Romans 12 1-8)

Lord Jesus Christ, open our ears, our minds and our hearts to receive your word

“Who do you say that I am?”

I guess if I was to ask any of you to say who **I** was, you'd maybe say that I'm Roy's wife and an LLM, I'm part of the ministry team and I attend Tuesday coffee, and I help out in the kitchen at Brambleton for the Community Fridge. Sainsbury's would add to that, that I'm a lover of yogurt, kiwis and toffees, based on their analysis of my shopping habits, but that online shopping holds no attraction for me whatsoever.

So is all this really what makes me, me? Well of course it's part of the picture, but I'd want someone to delve rather deeper to get it right. Identity is very important to us isn't it, so it's what our new Foyer groups are about, getting to know each other better, because it can be really painful if people misunderstand us and get us wrong.

Well today we've heard Jesus being concerned about **his** identity. Have his disciples really got **him** right. Are they perceptive enough to have taken on board the subtle clues he's been drip feeding them throughout their relationship? Their understanding matters, because his mission in the world depends on them.

So he'll start with the easiest question— Who do other people say I am? It appears there's no problem answering that. There's plenty of gossip and rumour around – Well, some say you're John the Baptist, some have you as Elijah and others as Jeremiah.

But then comes the crunch question - what about you, who do **you** say that I am?

How long does the silence last while they inspect their sandals? Then Peter speaks, with his God given answer; no need for him to confer with his team members or consider phoning a friend. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”.

Who do **you** say that I am? That's today's question from Jesus for us. And he's not conducting a piece of market research in the centre of Farnham, to be hurried past with a dismissive hand gesture, or a ‘Sorry I can't stop now.’

A couple of Fridays ago I was taking the short Pause for Thought service in the Spire church coffee bar. There was quite a gathering so I was offered a microphone so as to be better heard. What I hadn't realised was that the microphone was connected to speakers which spread my words around the coffee bar, rather than just to those in the prayer corner, and afterwards a gentleman who'd been having his coffee came with his questions. Who is this God that you talk about so easily? Why isn't he fixing my life for me?

I was confronted and fumbling around for the right words for such important questions, when God inspired the person sitting next to me to contribute his answers with greater clarity. But the encounter has stayed with me and bothered me. **God** had confronted me in that person. Who do you say that I am?

What might any of us answer? Well we declare our faith each Sunday when we repeat the words of the creed – We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God and then we affirm our beliefs even further. But how does all that affect our Christian identity? Because when we declare that Jesus is the Son of God and that he came to show us something of God himself and how to live, and then carried all our failings to the cross, then surely we have to be different from someone who doesn't have those beliefs. Would anyone know I was a Christian from my life?

For Paul there is no question about who Jesus is. His confrontation with God on the Damascus road has transformed how **he's** lived his life afterwards. So he wants those somewhat wayward Roman Christians to work harder at integrating their faith into their everyday identities, rather than still choosing to live by society's norms.

Twenty-first century culture is equally challenging. So who is God for us? Is he perhaps something of a rule-maker who sets 50 impossible things to do before breakfast? Is he some kind of Mr. Fix-It who's expected to repair the world's messes and ours? Is he the disturber of our consciences even when we don't want him to? Or is he the one who inspires us at times to become more than we could have imagined, or who humbles us with his grace?

God's mission in the world depends on his disciples understanding who he is. And up steps Peter with his flash of inspiration, yet who so often puts his foot in his mouth and even denies under pressure, that he knows Jesus. And Jesus says that this person and his declaration will be the foundational rock on which his church is to be built. As disciples we're tasked with continuing as his church and we're certainly chips from that block, inspired at times, denying our faith when under pressure, following society's norms rather than standing for God's truths.

Yet although rocks can become unstable, can be undermined and splinter under attack, generation after generation has been fed by weak disciples, varied in their gifts, all equal in the sight of God, simply trying their best to understand the unfathomable. And the gates of hell have not, and we are promised, will not prevail.

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