

The Church's prayer for this Sunday - The eleventh Sunday after Trinity

God of glory,
the end of our searching,
help us to lay aside
all that prevents us from seeking your kingdom,
and to give all that we have
to gain the pearl beyond all price,
through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 23rd August 2020, The eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 138

Thanksgiving and Praise

Of David.

- 1 I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
- 2 I bow down towards your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.
- 3 On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of 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,
for great is the glory of the Lord.
- 6 For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.
- 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
- 8 The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 51: 1-6

Blessings in Store for God's People

1 Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

2 Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.

3 For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

4 Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.

5 I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.

6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 16: 13-20

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

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.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the eleventh Sunday after Trinity from Revd Dr Lynda Taylor, Lead Chaplain for Cambridgeshire Police and member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter.

Opening prayer:

Holy Spirit of God, open our eyes and our ears to your living word, we pray; may it take root in our hearts and minds, and may it bear fruit in thoughts and our actions. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Our gospel reading this week comes from Matthew, Chapter 16. Over recent weeks and months we've been reading, hearing and reflecting on extracts from Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry. Like his fellow gospel writers, Matthew points us directly to Jesus - to what Jesus said and to what Jesus did. This week Matthew points us very explicitly to who Jesus is.

So often in the gospels, we see Jesus through the eyes of the people he encounters: a blind man called **Bartimaeus** who receives his sight from Jesus; a tormented woman called **Mary** who receives peace of mind; a tax collector called **Zacchaeus** who recovers his integrity; a grieving father called **Jairus** who receives his daughter back from death, and so on. We don't always know the names of the people Jesus met, like the Canaanite woman and her daughter last week whose lives he transformed, but very often we are given their name.

Names are important – they are an essential part of who we are. Knowing someone’s name can often bring us closer to them. In this week’s gospel passage, we see Jesus through the eyes of a man called **Peter**. Peter is someone we already know a little about: Peter - the bold and impetuous fisherman from Galilee; Peter – one of the first disciples to follow Jesus along with his brother **Andrew**. What are we going to learn as we look at Jesus through Peter’s eyes?

I wonder if you are one of the 6 million people who enjoy watching the television series ‘*Who do you think you are?*’ on BBC1, first broadcast in 2004? It’s a popular TV programme in which someone with a famous name looks back into their family history, often discovering secrets and surprises along the way about the lives of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Sometimes, what they discover in the past helps to explain things they experience or puzzle over in the present. In our reading from Matthew’s gospel we see Jesus asking his disciples a similar but slightly different question – not ‘*Who do you think you are?*’ but ‘*Who do you think I am?*’

Actually, that’s not the first question Jesus asks his disciples. The first question he asks is more along the lines of ‘*Who do other people think that I am?*’ Jesus is approaching the end of his earthly ministry. After 3 years of intensive teaching and preaching, healing the sick and challenging the religious and political authorities, perhaps Jesus is curious to know how ordinary people perceive him and what they are saying about him? How many people have actually grasped his true identity and mission as the Son of God and Saviour of the world? The disciples give various answers to Jesus’ first question – ‘*Who do people say that I am?*’ They mention several names which are, in themselves, intriguing and illuminating: ‘*Well*’, say the disciples, ‘*some people say that you are **John the Baptist**; others think you are **Elijah**, and some think you are **Jeremiah** or one of the prophets.*’ So, who are these characters and why do their names come to people’s minds?

We know that **John the Baptist** was Jesus’ cousin, and we read in Matthew Chapter 14 that John had recently been executed by the Jewish ruler Herod Antipas for his public criticism of Herod’s marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. But there were some people who believed John the Baptist was so great a figure, perhaps he could come back to life? Indeed Herod Antipas himself, on hearing about Jesus’ miraculous powers, may have been responsible for unintentionally starting such a rumour. So perhaps it was understandable that some people thought Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life.

But why did people associate Jesus with **Elijah** or **Jeremiah** – two ancient and honoured names from Jewish history and scripture? When people identified Jesus as Elijah or as Jeremiah, perhaps they regarded him as belonging to the category of the ancient prophets, those who stood up and spoke God’s word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious rulers.

Jesus could easily be viewed as a contemporary prophet – not simply one who foretells the future, but one who is God’s mouthpiece against injustice and wickedness in high places.

Elijah was considered the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, but Elijah was also known as the person who would return to earth to prepare the way for the arrival of the Jewish Messiah, God’s Anointed King and leader of God’s people. To this day, the Jewish community still await the return of Elijah, and at the annual Passover meal a chair may be left vacant at the table specifically for Elijah. For when Elijah comes, the Messiah will not be far behind. So perhaps some people looked on Jesus as the herald of the Messiah and the forerunner of the direct intervention of God. Like Elijah, **Jeremiah** too was understood to be a forerunner of the Messiah, coming to his country’s aid in time of trouble. So the people were paying Jesus a great compliment and setting him up in a high place, for both Jeremiah and Elijah were none other than the expected forerunners of the Anointed One of God. When they arrived, it was widely believed, God’s Kingdom would be very near indeed.

‘Fair enough’, says Jesus to his disciples, ‘all that makes sense, but what about you – who do YOU think I am?’

At this point, we can imagine a moment of embarrassed silence among Jesus’ disciples. Who will speak first, and what will they say? Which one of the three names mentioned thus far was the right answer? Or was it none of them – and something else instead? Who will be brave enough to speak aloud what they believe?

And then Peter steps up to share a conviction that we sense has been growing in his heart and mind over the months and years he has spent with Jesus. Peter has seen Jesus cure his mother-in-law of a fever; he has watched as Jesus healed the blind and the lame; he has heard Jesus tell stories that are laden with meaning, and listened as Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is near; Peter has been personally involved as Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, and as Jesus walked on water; he even saw Jesus raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. What will Peter say? Who is this Jesus he has shared so much with and come to know?

Peter says the only thing that makes sense to him, after all that he himself has seen and heard and experienced: ***‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!’*** In other words, Peter is saying, *‘You are the Messiah – not a returning Elijah or Jeremiah. You are God’s Anointed One, the one for whom our people have been waiting for so long, but for whom we need wait no longer.’*

The words *Messiah* and *Christ* are one and the same. *Messiah* is the Hebrew-Aramaic word, while *Christ* is a Greek word. They both mean God’s Anointed One. Kings were ordained to

office by anointing with oil, and the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, is God's King over all people.

I suspect Jesus must have been both relieved and thrilled by Peter's declaration. Peter hasn't always got it right during Jesus' ministry, saying and doing things that didn't always go down well with Jesus. And Jesus often took Peter to task for it. But at this point Peter has discovered, through the grace and wisdom of God, who Jesus truly is and what this means. In response, Jesus addresses Peter very personally, speaking his name and playing lovingly with its meaning, with deep significance for Peter's destiny.

I wonder if your name has a particular meaning? What does it say about you?

Peter had two versions of his name: one was **Peter** – from the Greek word *Petros* meaning 'stone' or 'rock', similar in form and meaning to its Latin equivalent *Petra*. Peter had an Aramaic name too – *Kephas* – which also means 'rock'. So Jesus uses Peter's given names and their meaning to fashion a rather clever play on words, at the same time paying his friend and follower a great compliment. *'Well done, Peter', says Jesus, 'this time you got it absolutely right – you are a rock, steady and firm, and you will play a foundational role in years to come as my followers are built into my Church, my body in God's world.'*

We know of course from the book of Acts that Peter the fisherman-disciple did indeed become one of the foundation stones and pillars of the early Christian church. And, if it was not for the faithful witness and work of Peter and the other apostles, you and I would simply not be here today as fellow disciples of Jesus and part of God's worldwide church.

So what does Peter's experience say to us in our time and place?

To be a true and faithful follower of Jesus, to be a Christian, is surely to be able to answer for ourselves Jesus' question *'Who do You say that I am?'* just as Peter did. As Christians we look at Jesus and see God's Son, anointed to be Lord and King of all that is. Like Peter, we too need to be able to publicly acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, individually and corporately. And in response, God makes us into living stones, people who are continually being built into the fabric of God's church, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone holding everything safely together in its true place (Ephesians 2:20). Without him, the whole building would just collapse. It's perhaps no surprise that later on Peter uses precisely this image of a building made of living stones in one of his letters to the early Christian church (1 Peter 2:4-8). Maybe when he wrote those words, Peter was recalling that revelatory conversation with Jesus recorded in Matthew 16 when he first publicly recognised Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.



The parishes of Barton, Caldecote with Childerley, Comberton,
Coton, Dry Drayton, Great and Little Eversden,
Hardwick, Harlton, Haslingfield and Toft

And if you aren't sure of the answer to Jesus' question '*Who do you say that I am?*', if you are still wondering about who Jesus really is, then why not have a conversation with someone who can help you to get to know Jesus better?

The building of God's church within and across the Lordsbridge Team needs every available human living stone if we are truly to be an effective people of God, bridging heaven and earth and bringing God's love and mercy to his world as He intends.

Amen.