

SERMON – 3/8/25

Matthew 16:13-20

“What about you? Jesus asked. Who do you say I am.”
(Matthew 16:15)

Over the summer as we have been reading through Luke's Gospel we have noted a number of times that we have turned a significant corner in the unfolding Gospel narrative. Jesus has set His face resolutely towards Jerusalem and the culmination of His earthly ministry at Calvary, and a new urgency has gripped Him as He tries to accomplish as much as He possibly can in the time remaining to Him without getting side-tracked.

This morning we have read from Matthew's Gospel the account of the episode that probably led Jesus to decide that the time was right to set His course towards the Cross. He and His disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee in the foothills of Mount Hermon near the main source of the River Jordan, a quiet spot away from the crowds where Jesus could spend some time with His disciples alone. It is here that He asks a seemingly unremarkable question: Who do people say the Son of Man is? (He often uses the phrase Son of Man to speak of Himself in the way that in English some people might use the word 'one' to talk of themselves without appearing self-centred.) He is perhaps trying to get a feel for the impact His ministry is having generally. Who do people think I am? And the disciples feed back what the word on the street is: Some say you are John the Baptist; others say you are Elijah; still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. That's all very interesting. The crowds have obviously grasped to some degree that He is a man of God, and a significant one at that, and they are trying to work out just who He is and what He has come to do.

But Jesus is not content just to have a second hand opinions – what He wants to know now is whether or not the disciples have grasped who He is. They are the ones who have seen Him up close and who have had the opportunity really to talk with Him and ask Him things. If He has not got through to them or if they have completely misunderstood His mission, He would have to rethink His strategy. “Who do *you* say I am?” He asks them.

How do you answer a question like that? It can be quite difficult to encapsulate who a person is if we are asked about them. We might describe or characterise a person in all sorts of ways – by their physical features, by the way they dress, by their accent or character or interests or irritating habits, and you would probably get as many different descriptions of a person as the number of people you asked – a workmate would describe you differently than a close friend or a member of your family would because the description we give depends on our own experience of the person we are describing. It's probably impossible to give a full and objective description of someone unless you were just to concentrate on facts and figures – age, height, weight, eye or hair colour – as if you were describing a crime suspect to the police. But that doesn't really tell you much about *who* they are as a person. And those would not be the things you would focus on if someone asked you who you thought they themselves were face to face.

Who do people today say the Son of Man is, I wonder? You would get a huge variety of answers if you stopped people in the streets or in the coffee shops or in the workplaces of Kinross, or indeed anywhere and asked them: 'Who do you think Jesus is?' These days you would get a lot of people suggesting that He is just a fictional character, or worse, a make-believe or mythological character, and even amongst those who are prepared to accept that He was an historical figure you would find many who would put Him in the same category as the Buddha or Confucius or the prophet Mohammed, an influential teacher, yes, someone whose words have endured, yes, perhaps even someone whose words have been twisted or appropriated by people with an agenda to push over the centuries.

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Jesus asks His disciples, and for what they're worth the answers come back as they still do today. "But what about *you*?" He asks. "Who do *you* say I am?" These are the people who had spent most time with Jesus and who had seen Him in the round, not just what He said in public and when He was teaching but what He said in every day conversation, first thing in the morning when He wasn't quite awake and last thing at night when He had had a long, hard day. Who do you say I am? And Simon Peter replies in the words that persuade Jesus that the time has come to take His mission

forward: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Peter (and I'm sure He is not alone amongst the disciples that day) has grasped the reality of who Jesus is and why He has come, even if he still had to understand that Jesus being the Messiah and the Son of God did not mean quite what he expected it to mean and wouldn't turn out to be the highway to glory that contemporary understandings of the role of the Messiah might lead him to anticipate. This was the turning point that took Jesus beyond His earthly roots in Galilee towards Jerusalem and the fulfilment of God's global and eternal purposes.

As a church we are about to embark upon a week of significant outreach in our community. Over the coming days perhaps 150 children and young people from a wide variety of homes in our parish will encounter this same Jesus, the eternal Son of God, in the stories that are told, in the songs that are sung, in the words and actions of those who are involved in Family Week and, through the prayers of many, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, who will blow like an unseen wind, who will burn like fire in their hearts and minds, who will knock at doors and disturb and comfort and challenge and bless those who have ears to hear. Don't let's underestimate the significance of what is happening this week. If we have faith to believe in the power of God, the impact of Family Week will not only be felt by those who attend nor even only by those who drop their children or their grandchildren off and pick them up but also in the wider community as people see the streams of people coming and going from the church and from the other venues where groups are meeting around the town. Although the message will be shared in all kinds of ways by all kinds of individuals during the course of the week, the power of the Gospel will not ultimately be revealed by flesh and blood (as Jesus says to Simon Peter in our reading) but by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ at work in the spiritual realm and in the deep places of the hearts of ordinary folk, young and old alike in our community.

It is my prayer that many, many people will hear and be challenged by the question that Jesus posed to His disciples all those years ago and which He still seeks an answer to from each and every one of us. "What about you? Who do you say I am?"

Let it start with you here this morning. Who do *you* say Jesus is? Do you secretly wonder if what people say might be true, that Jesus is the product of some wishful thinking, a figure like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy that many people outgrow and leave behind. Or do you buy one of the answers that chimes with the spirit of the age – that He is a wise teacher who offers a counter-cultural philosophy that challenges this world's institutions but who ultimately goes the way of the leaders of all protest movements and achieves nothing more than a place in history's hall of heroes. Or perhaps you accept the Church's teaching that He is the Saviour of the world, that He is the Lord of heaven and earth, that He is the Friend of sinners, that He is the Son of God and you tick the box Christian on the census, even though you are not too sure what significance the identity of Jesus has for you. The question remains: Who do *you* say Jesus is? And I'd like you to consider this morning what your own personal answer is to that question.

In this week of outreach, if one of the children or young people attending were to ask you that question, what would you say? Or if one of the parents or grandparents dropping their youngsters off were to ask you that question, what would you say? Or if one of your neighbours or a family member or a visitor, knowing that you are a church member and knowing that Family Week was on, were to ask you that question, what would you say? Who do *you* say Jesus is?

The same Simon Peter who first answered that question wrote a letter which is in the New Testament that exhorts those He is writing it to (including us): "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15) And I want to encourage you this week to give that some serious thought so that you *are* prepared to answer anyone who asks you about your faith, and in particular anyone who asks you who you think Jesus is.

My friends, there is no more significant question you will ever be asked in life than this one. Other people can give their answers and as *part* of your response you can certainly point to other people's answers, but at the end of the day only you can answer that question for yourself: Who do *you* say Jesus is? Because the answer you have will determine the foundations you have for

faith and life for the here and now and for eternity. Jesus tells Peter that His answer all those years ago – You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God – is the rock on which the church is built, the keys to the gates of everlasting life, the touchstone on which everything that is anything rises and falls. It really is that important.

Who do people say the Son of Man is? “But what about you? Jesus asked. Who do you say I am.”