

Sermon for Sunday 23rd August 2020

Well, it has been lovely to have been away but as my mother used to say “Nice to go away but nice to come home!” And so it is very nice indeed to return home after a wonderful couple of weeks by the sea and to settle down once again at home and back with you all. Its as if you need to leave your home to appreciate it sometimes and of course we have all seen rather a lot of our homes this year. Yet, coming back to work is a big of a thing really isn't it? It felt that on taking 3 weeks leave I had to literally take off my responsibilities and concerns for the parish, a bit like a robe, and so on my return I had to also put that robe back on again! And you will be pleased to know I hope, that the robe seems to fit well again!

It made me think though just how much we identify ourselves with what we do rather than who we truly are in our deepest being. Who are we we sometimes wonder? It is a bit of a joke thing when someone might say “I need to find myself”! We might say “yeah, yeah”. But we do have all sort of identities in our lives. For example, I am a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a daughter in law, a sister in law, a cousin, a friend, a wife, a mother, a Christian and now horror of horrors I seem to be a vicar!!! But there are times when we seriously do need to know who we are apart from those roles and different identities. I guess it's a bit like someone who may have given years to a certain job or profession and when they have to retire, suddenly don't literally know who they are. Their work or job which defined them is simply not there any more.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus asks his disciples about his identity. First he asks them who others think he is. The disciples answer that some say he is John the Baptist (come back from the dead by this time of course); others say he is Elijah returned; and still others claim that Jesus is Jeremiah or some other dead prophet. In fact really, people cannot agree. They all seem to think he is an incarnation or a ghost of one of the powerful prophets from their past. They do not seem to think that Jesus could be someone different sent from God. So then Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is: “But who do you say that I am?”

It is Simon Peter who gives the definitive answer, reaching through all the rather predictable identities that others believed about him:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. This flash of perception earns him both an affirmation and a promise from Jesus, who renames him Peter, “the rock”, “and on this rock I will build my church”.

As we know this was a high point for Peter but Peter was very human indeed like us and he was also going to be failing dramatically before the end of the tale so to speak. Peter is a very comforting character in this way, that his impetuous and passion can sometimes get him into trouble.

These words that Peter speaks of who Jesus really is are not from him but from God himself. Jesus makes that very clear. This is divine revelation. They are not words based on rumour or the ideas of others.

And it is to this rather fallible human being that Jesus entrusts the keys of the kingdom of heaven to. Giving him an authority in that whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever he looses or frees on earth, will be loosed or freed in heaven.

This is an astonishing statement which I think shows us that what we do on earth matters, that it has an impact in the heavens and in the atmosphere around us. We talk about the crowds of witnesses in heaven don't we or the company of heaven who are always included and there with us as we celebrate Holy Communion. I guess in a way it's like the heavens are witnesses of the people and things that we imprison and the people and things we set free. Matthew's Jesus says when you have treated the most vulnerable, the stranger, foreigner, the imprisoned, the homeless, the hungry with compassion, justice and human care, you have done so to me, and then heaven rejoices. Then equally perhaps this text is saying when we don't do these things heaven is also affected.

It is also so extraordinary that Jesus through Peter entrusts his church to all of us actually. What an honour but what a challenge! And it makes me think, how do we use this amazing gift and calling?

Like the disciples we have to answer the same question for ourselves; who do we say Jesus is? Can we answer? Not just with the mind but with the heart? How do we begin to grasp the deep realities of Jesus' core identity. Well I think there comes a time when all the words and good intentions run out and we have to literally come to God, come into his presence, however that is for you, and just be quiet, call on his name or use a short memorable piece of scripture or words of a hymn. Let distractions come and go and just be. This is contemplative prayer and it is something that I encourage us all to practice. Its not easy as we will find other things crashing into our minds, but try it! We all need to find our true identity in God, that self, that essence which will when found bring true humility and lose pride, arrogance and ego which dog us all in different ways. Those three, pride, arrogance and ego give birth to superiority and inferiority complexes. God is waiting to transform us into his image and he will be merciful and loving towards us. I am sure of that.

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God and if he is a living God, he is a dynamic God, a God of the present moment, not just of the past. God is living. God is not dead, whatever some people today might believe. The fact that Jesus is who he is said to be, means that God continues to speak and to act. God does not have to resurrect John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or any other prophet to speak. God never ceases to exist, to create, to anoint. God is a relevant God, a contextual God and God is still at work.

This past year has had a significant effect on all of us. Challenges to our freedom and lives may have led many to question previously strongly held views. We are all very vulnerable when it comes down to it. But I believe that God has been creating faith, hope, and love, during these unprecedented times. In the notes and phone calls that have taken the place of hospital visits; in the communal kindness and responsibility to wear masks in public even though they can feel uncomfortable at times and so hot! In the community projects and help that we have known and in the creativity found to do things differently which have released so many God given gifts. God is at work!

So too then, let us discover more deeply just who Jesus Christ is and discover our identity in him. May we be alert to the still small voice of God whispering in the heart of our being. As Paul urges the church in Rome, present yourselves as a living sacrifice... 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. May the Lord bless us all in this endeavour.

Amen.