

Jesus is who he is ...

... not who we'd like him to be

A sermon given on the Eleventh Sunday of Trinity, 23rd August 2020, by the Rt Revd David James, in the Minster.

Matthew 16:13-20

If you meet a person from the Punjab, it's just possible they will have the surname Masīḥ and if so, they could well be a Christian, though not necessarily. Masīḥ is Arabic and Urdu for messiah. When Christian missionaries came to the Punjab in the 19th century, some of the local people chose not to worship in a mosque or in the temple or in the gurdwara, but rather to become disciples of Isa al-Masīḥ - 'Jesus, the Messiah'. And some of these made their faith public by taking on as their family name, the name Masīḥ. Becoming a Christian had a number of implications for them. Many of the converts were Hindus from the lowest caste, often invisible in the society in which they lived. So Peter's words from his first letter rang gloriously true for them: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people." They gained an inner dignity and sense of worth, denied them by their position in society. Often they came together into Christian villages or quarters within towns or cities where it was easier to live as a Christian and to support each other in their faith. And where they could worship freely and in safety. But bearing the name Masīḥ also marked them out as followers of the Christ; as Christians.

I've had the privilege and pleasure three times of visiting Pakistan. And the first time I went, my host took me to a salt mine where I met a man who may or may not have been named Masīḥ. He was known in the mine simply as 'The Christian', because he was the only one. And that's how I remember him, 'The Christian.' He told me that there have been two of them at one time, but the other Christian weakened under pressure from all his workmates and converted to Islam. So now he was the only one there to name the name and to live the name of Isa al-Masīḥ.

In our gospel passage, Jesus takes his disciples to the region of Caesarea Phillipi, just north of Galilee. It's a good place to go on pilgrimage if you're religiously inclined. Well, except if you're Jewish. There are 14 shrines there to local pagan deities, all with their effigies of wood or stone or metal. By the source of the River Jordan, there's a temple to Pan, the Greek god of rivers and trees and of fertility. And there, also, is the new and

wonderfully glistening white marble temple that Herod the Great built to Caesar as God. After perhaps two and a half years together, the disciples listening to Jesus; doing their heads in as they tried to understand his parables; watching his impact on people, both crowds and individuals; living with him on the edge; flirting with danger: here it is that Jesus chooses this backdrop to ask his followers to go beyond having an 'interest' in him and to making a 'commitment'. (Do you know what the differences between interest and commitment - well ask a hen and a pig about the breakfast some of you might have had this morning.)

Jesus wants them not just to take an interest, but to choose this day whom they will serve: "Who do you say that I am?" Two weeks ago, Tim reminded us how Peter leapt from his boat 'onto' the water, which quickly became 'into' the water, and Jesus saved him. And here is Peter again who, with a leap of faith exclaims, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And this is the foundation of a faith and trust in a God who is Christlike and who, through the water of his spirit, gives us life. Our petty idols and superstitions and local traditions won't save us; back-to-nature pantheism won't save us; trust in political and economic power won't save us: the agent of God's salvation is a jobbing carpenter who lived in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago.

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus.

C.S. Lewis said that there is one thing you cannot say of Jesus, and that is that he was a great moral teacher: Jesus was either mad or bad or he was who he claimed to be. But if you're wondering at this moment how you might answer Jesus's question, I'd ask you to wait for another week until you hear the next part of the story, because the implications of your answer are considerable and in some ways costly (remember the hen and the pig). You can't stand with Peter and say "Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of God", and then say, "So what?" - unless your "So what?" is actually a serious question. Because to stand alongside Peter or to leap with him is to turn your back on the modern equivalent of these other gods, the sovereignty of the state or nature-worship or all our various petty idolatries, and to face..... well, to quote the words of reflection by Sheila Walker on this passage:

"God is not the teacher who gives us a blank sheet of paper and asks us to draw our ideas of God; or the one who points up and out to nature and asks us to wonder at it, to become

one with it; nor the one who points inwards, allows us to find diversity, the depth of our being. No. God is the one who intrudes into the world this Jesus, demanding 'Who do you say that I am?' Demanding an answer. And like everyone else, he is who he is, not who I'd like him to be."

Reading Text

Matthew 16:13-20

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.