

# Who do you say that I am?

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*A sermon given on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 23rd August, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Wallis, in Beverley Minster*

*Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20*

Life is full of big questions. I know when I was a teacher, we used to have this Wonder Wall and we put a big question up there every week: who am I; what is the purpose of life; who made God? Some questions have life-changing consequences. What about this one: will you marry me? Or, are you sure you want to invest your life savings in this? Or, do you really want to give that television interview, Diana? The way we answer certain questions can shape the course of our lives and in today's Gospel, Jesus asks perhaps the most important question that anyone can ever answer. *'Who do you say that I am?'* And it was a dividing question for the disciples, and it still remains a dividing question for us today. Jesus was and still is a very divisive figure. I wonder how you would answer that question, who do you say that I am? People have answered in many different ways: some say he's a good moral teacher; others believe he is a prophet who spoke God's word, but he was merely man. But C.S. Lewis famously challenged this idea. He said these words: A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.' Jesus does not give us much room for neutrality.

And the question remains, *'Who do you say that I am?'* And as usual, Peter was the first to answer, *'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'* What an extraordinary declaration. Peter is saying, 'You're the one we've been waiting for. You are God's promised King. You are the image of the invisible God. You are God among us.' And Jesus tells Peter that this insight did not come from his own rational human wisdom. It was revealed to him by God. The Holy Spirit opened Peter's eyes to see who Jesus truly was. And upon that revelation, Jesus says he will build his church, not simply upon Peter the man, but upon the truth that Peter has confessed, that Jesus Christ is Lord, he is King over all.

And the Church today stands or falls on this foundation, not on its buildings, not on its traditions, not even on its clergy, not on its programmes, but the person and the saving work of Jesus Christ: his Incarnation, his death, his resurrection. Through him the barrier between God and humanity is torn down. And through him we receive forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation to God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So what is your experience of answering that question for yourself?

Yesterday I was invited to the Bishop's house along with about 60 other people, and they were all people who had been confirmed by the Bishop this last last year. And during the bre— well, it wasn't a breakfast. I was hoping for bacon, but we just had cake and ice cream. But, but the best bit was that during the morning, some people who had been confirmed stood up and they told their stories. Not long life stories, but stories of how God had invaded their lives and they had gone in a different direction because of the Holy Spirit, and they were now confirmed. There was one guy and he said, 'I am the most unlikely person ever to be a Christian.' And I thought, wow, is there any of us that is unlikely to God? He knows each of us, doesn't he? But God had his hand on this young man, and this young man said, 'And now I want to be a priest.' I thought, wow, what a turnabout! So it was so encouraging that God is at work in the lives of those who are open to him.

And then we move on in the passage, and Jesus then tells Peter, 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' But first, a joke: Why did the key go into therapy? Because it had too many issues to unlock. Yeah, not that good, is it? Best I could find. But I remember when I was given the keys to the Minster, I just thought, what a huge responsibility these keys are. Keys are significant, aren't they? Do you

remember being given the keys, perhaps to your parents' home or to your first car or even your own home? or place of work. They signal responsibilities and trust, don't they? They open doors, and to be given keys is to be entrusted with something valuable. So what is Jesus saying to Peter, and hence his church today, by giving him and giving us the keys to his kingdom?

Here Jesus is entrusting his church with the mission of representing him in the world. The church—there's no God's Plan B - the church is Plan A. We are the vehicle by which he will use us to proclaim his word, to embody his love, and also this: to discern God's will in every generation. This is an extraordinary privilege and a sobering responsibility: Jesus entrusting his mission to his people, continuing that work, partnering with the Holy Spirit and bringing reconciliation between God and man. So given that tremendous responsibility that we have been given, how should we respond? And this is where the words from Paul to the Romans come in. Paul begins, '*Therefore, in view of God's mercy*' - because of everything God has done for us in Christ. This is what he says: '*Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*'

Now, this isn't a Sunday-only type of commitment. Paul is saying to the new Christians in Rome, who were as diverse and different as we all are, give God your whole life, not just Sunday mornings for an hour or so, not just your beliefs, not just part of your heart, give him everything— your thoughts, your desires, your plans, your relationships, your resources, your finances, your success, your failures, your weaknesses, your sin. Give him your past, your present, and your future, and come to him and place it all in his hands. Why? Because that is the way to grow as a disciple of Christ. Don't hold anything back. Don't have any rooms in your life or your heart which are locked to the Spirit of God. Let him have everything because he created you, he knows you, and there's nothing that surprises him. Trust him with your life. And Paul continues with his advice to these new Christians: '*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*' You think of being conformed, you fitting in, you're going along, you're belonging. But you're not sticking your head above that parapet. But Paul says, don't conform to this world, be transformed. And this is a challenge because we live in a material world and we're programmed to respond mainly to the things that we can see, touch, and feel. And this material world just pulls us down to the gravity of the earth. We do not see the unseen worlds around us, which are just as real but cannot be touched so easily: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

And in the West, we live in a largely secular culture which says that, yes, there might be a God, but we don't know for sure, so let's make the most of our time here; let's find our own sense of meaning. To most people, life is about self-fulfillment, self-expression, and self-interest. Create your own truth. Live for yourself. But if you allow God to impact your worldview, you begin to see things differently: you are loved, accepted, forgiven, and purposed in the plan of God - discover the adventure of who you were created to be and in this you will find fulfilment. When you receive his love, he enables you to love him more and love your neighbour as yourself. When you receive his mercy, he enables you to show mercy. When you receive his justice, he enables you to seek justice.

And this kind of life does not just happen accidentally. It requires daily decision, a daily surrender, a daily choosing of the way of Jesus. But faith is not just an individual pursuit. We belong to one another. Paul says, '*We are members of one body.*' Every member matters, and the Holy Spirit will give gifts for the building up of the church to each individual. Some serve, some teach, some encourage, some lead, some give, some pray, some offer hospitality, some evangelise, some shepherd. None of these gifts is given for personal recognition - they are given for the common good and for the mission of God. So as a church, if you see yourself as a member of the body of Christ, you will have a gift of the Holy Spirit.

What gift has he given you, and how are you using it for his kingdom? Because the thing is, if we are a body, just like in the human body and one part of the body says, 'Well, I'm not going to play my part,' then the whole body suffers. And each of us has been given a unique role to play. So perhaps God is calling some of us today to take a step of faith, to serve, to lead, to speak, to pray, to give, to encourage, to step into something that we have been avoiding - sometimes we hesitate because we are afraid of failure. But

what if failure is not stepping out? That's failure. What if failure is never trusting God enough to discover what he could do through us? As D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist said, 'The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated or surrendered to him', or a woman, or a church. Imagine what God could do through people who are wholly surrendered to Christ each day.

So to conclude, Jesus still asks the same question today: 'Who do you say that I am?' And the answer we give will shape our lives. And so we end with the beautiful words of the carol Christina Rossetti:

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.  
But what I can, I give him, give him my heart.

..... because he is worth it.

Thank you.

# Reading Texts

## Romans 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup> I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup> the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

## Matthew 16:13-20

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' <sup>14</sup> And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' <sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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.' <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.