

Recognising Jesus

Matthew 16:13 – 19

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, through Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It's a joy to be here with you to celebrate your patronal festival, and it's an honour to share some reflections on the apostle Peter, whose name you bear. He is no less than the father of the church – as we see in the window dedicated to him in this beautiful building, and as we heard in our gospel reading this morning. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”! Stirring words from Jesus you've probably heard many times – at previous patronal feasts!

That said, I'm starting in a slightly strange place this morning. I'm wondering if you, like me, are ever troubled by the 3am anxieties? Being woken in the early hours by thoughts and anxious feelings that swirl around in your head and send sleep flying away. Often for me it's after I've had a challenge to negotiate – maybe a difficult conversation, or a big event I had to lead, or guest preaching at another church...! You know the kind of thoughts: did I really do *that*? I should've said this. What did they think of me? The questions of insecurity and the crises of identity that always wait until 3 o'clock in the morning...

I mention this because for a long time I wondered if something like this was behind Jesus' questions in our gospel passage. Did his queries to the disciples come from an anxious insecurity? “*What are people thinking about me? Who do people say that I am?*” Was Jesus having a 3am crisis of identity?

I've decided though, probably not. Firstly because Jesus' crisis of identity happened much earlier, at the beginning of his ministry. At his baptism in the Jordan River, when he heard a Voice from heaven speaking to him. The Voice told Jesus who he was: “You are my Son whom I love and I am so pleased with you.” Jesus heard God his Father speak to him, declaring Jesus' identity as God's Son, assuring him of God's love and delight in him.

The identity crisis followed immediately, though, as Jesus went out into the Judean wilderness for a 40-day retreat of solitude, fasting and prayer. There, another voice comes. “If you *are* the son of God, then *prove* it!” Three times the voice questions Jesus' identity as God has just named it at his baptism. In that time of crisis, Jesus is tempted to doubt the first Voice, the words of his Father. He returns repeatedly to scripture to defend his identity and his mission.

But now here we are, three years later as Jesus' ministry moves towards its culmination. And Jesus returns to the identity questions. Jesus asks his disciples about his identity, but this time the questions are not for him - the questions are for *them*. For us. “Who do people say I am?”

The disciples answer: “Some think you're John the Baptist come back to life; others think you're Elijah or one of the prophets resurrected”.

Then Jesus focuses his question to each of them standing around him - a direct, personal question: “who do *you* say that I am?”

This is not about the crowds and their opinions; rather this is about these men, and what is happening *in them*. The identity crisis is theirs. And Simon Peter, already beginning to take the lead, answers with a great faith statement: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Simon recognises that the Messiah is standing before them: God’s anointed king whom they have been awaiting for centuries.

Jesus’ response to Simon’s faith statement is not to talk about himself, but about what is happening in Simon Peter. “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being!” Simon’s recognition of Jesus’ identity is a revelation from God the Father.

And then Jesus speaks his famous words to Simon, renaming him **Peter** - in Greek, *Petros*. Jesus makes a pun on this new name, this new man Peter, using the word for rock, *petra*. He says: “You are Petros, and on this *petra* (rock), I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” This *petra* is the foundation stone for Jesus’ church.

Peter’s divinely-inspired recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, as the very Son of God, begins a process of transformation in Peter. It’s fair to say, though, that it is not an instantaneous transformation! In the very next scene as Jesus describes what his Messiahship looks like – rejection, suffering and execution on a Roman cross – Peter is appalled at the very thought, and rebukes Jesus! And Jesus must turn in rebuke Peter - or rebuke the voice he hears coming from Peter’s mouth, the voice he heard three years earlier in the desert, tempting him to a different identity and path. “*Get behind me, Satan...*”

Nevertheless this new Peter, this slowly transforming man, will go on to preach one of the greatest sermons ever, just a few months later at Pentecost.

Theologians have debated what the ‘rock’ in Jesus’ prophetic statement is. Is it Peter himself? Is the man himself the foundation stone on which the church is built? Or is it perhaps more specifically Peter’s declaration of faith? That divinely-revealed recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, as God’s son? This confession itself is the rock upon which Jesus builds his church. The church of Jesus Christ, the called-out community of God, has gathered and grown around this very confession for two millenia now. This confession of faith is expressed in many different languages, in many different cultural ways, in many different countries and locations around this world, and continues to happen as each new person recognises who Jesus is, and makes the astonished confession, “you are the Messiah, the Son of God!”

And another life is transformed, another person finds a new identity in this Jesus Christ.

We might think that Peter’s great confession of faith, his new name and transformed identity, lead him on a path of greatness as the father of the church. But the Bible won’t let us glorify Peter’s transformation. Our other scripture readings this morning remind us that Peter’s path, like the lives of so many of God’s saints, was not a path of glory and honour, but a path of suffering and sacrifice.

Think of Ezekiel, bound and silenced in his prophetic ministry; of James the brother of John, killed by Herod for his faith, and Peter himself imprisoned by Herod, ready for execution – until God

intervened. We remember where Peter's path finally leads, to a martyr's death on an upside-down cross somewhere in Rome.

And hear Peter's own words, from his first letter: "if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." And a little later in ch 4, these words:

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed."

Peter understood that his new identity and path would follow the path of his master and Lord.

When Jesus asked those identity questions that day in Caesarea Philippi, he created an identity crisis in his disciples. Simon's recognition of Jesus' identity changed Simon personally, and took him on this path of costly sacrifice.

But the transformed Simon became **Peter**, in his new identity as Pentecost apostle of Jesus Christ, leader of the Church, the saint who is remembered on patronal feast days and commemorated in stained glass windows. The light that went on in Peter that day, the words that came out of his surprised heart, his transfixed mind, his courageous mouth - that confession of faith began a flood of similar confessions down through the ages that continues today.

Peter was transformed; the Samaritan woman was transformed; Mary of Magdala was transformed; Saul was transformed into Paul; and Augustine, and Francis of Assisi, and Martin Luther, and C.S. Lewis, and...! We could keep naming for hours.

Friends, in the end my 3am identity crises usually fade away in the morning light. But Jesus' identity question doesn't fade away. Actually, he goes on asking it. His question invites me to a transformation of myself and my life purpose; to a new identity that finds fulfilment and joy in his companionship. As Simon Peter did.

Jesus' identity question matters profoundly, and he goes on asking it. It resonates again here this morning for us, too.

"Who do *you* say that I am?"

Prayer: Lord Jesus, grant us eyes to recognise you, ears to hear your voice, and hearts open to receive your love. May we come to know you more fully, and so come to know ourselves more truly. Amen.