



**Romans 12.1-8** NT p.141  
**Matthew 16.13-20** NT p. 15  
**27th August 2023**

## Faith never comes fully formed

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### Introduction to the Theme

Once, when visiting the relatives of a church member who had passed away and whose funeral we were planning, I was asked if I wouldn't mention Jesus in the service.

I understood where they were coming from because they had already shared with me that unlike the mum they loved very much, they themselves didn't have that same faith.

It's always a challenge knowing who a funeral is for, the person who has died or the bereaved? Of course, it's for both.

So, I asked if they would be happy if I didn't over invoke the name of Jesus but still spoke of him because I happened to know that Jesus had, in fact, meant a lot to mum. They were fine with that, and their mother's funeral was a lovely celebration of her wonderful life.

Jesus can be, maybe always has been, a figure who draws all sorts of reactions from folk.

Some people tell us they are not too sure about Church but think a lot of Jesus.

For Christians Jesus means a very great deal.

Every year, in the lectionary, we go through one of the gospels that tells his story and unpacks his message. Our church year is peppered with services that mark his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

And for very many of us, when we get bogged down in the dogma and doctrine of the church it's the wonderful stories and sayings of Jesus that boost our faith and give us a steer on life. The younger generation attending Greenbelt this weekend might well ask: *What would Jesus do?* But actually it's not a bad question for anyone of any age to ponder.

In our reading today from the Gospels Jesus asks Peter: *Who do you say that I am?*

What a question and it wasn't even multiple choice! Peter answers well and shows a lot of faith and belief as he calls Jesus the Messiah. Yet moments later, in Mark's version at least, he then shows us that the title of Messiah had many definitions. So, a supplementary question was really needed that asked *What sort of Messiah was Jesus?*

A few years ago, we spent a day or two in Chichester and we loved looking around its splendid and lively cathedral. One of the things that struck me was just how good the staff had been in trying to explain the faith for visitors and here's what one of the information

boards said in a side aisle:

*This church is built in the shape of a cross.*

*Christians believe that we see God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom of justice, peace and love for all. Some people were so threatened that he was crucified. Christians believe that God raised Jesus to new life and that he invites everyone to share that new life for ever. Responding to that invitation is what the Christian journey is about.*

Well I thought that was pretty good and said an enormous amount in very few words! It's the sort of statement we could spend hours discussing and unpacking.

Our Gospel reading this morning asks the question the Chichester statement was trying to answer: *Who is Jesus and what do we make of him?*

## **The Sermon**

I almost entitled this sermon *The Rabbi who Winked*.

It's not the start of joke but a very special moment of connection between me, a Christian minister and the Rabbi who was presiding one Passover at the Seder Meal in our church hall. I was a guest, seated beside him, so whenever the liturgy referred to a Messiah, he looked at me, smiled and winked! As if to say, on this issue our faiths are not agreed. Yet, it was all done with such respect, to the point that as I left that gathering two young Jewish men shook my hand, looked me in the eye and wished me a very Happy Easter for the next day.

The question at the heart of this morning's gospel *Who do people say the Son of Man is*, would be answered differently by a Christian Minister than by a Jewish Rabbi. But long may we wink at each other as we do so!

So, Jesus has reached Caesarea Philippi in his travels, and it's about as far north as he would go. Today the city is on the border with Lebanon. It's a place that speaks volumes about status and power because its very name references both Imperial Rome, Caesar and the local Monarchy, Herod's son Philip.

Caesarea Philippi was perhaps an appropriate place to ask questions of identity and to examine the nature of leadership.

So, in a way it would have been a bit like standing outside Buck House and asking the crowd: *who is the King?*

That's because kings and prophets were called Messiah. Yet, ordinary people who seemed to have a special gifting from God were also called Messiah. Preachers like John the Baptist were even viewed as Messianic.

Jesus seems keen for some feedback now he's been preaching and teaching for some time.

Initially the disciples hedged their bets and smooth away the question with the compliment that many see Jesus in the tradition of John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah. But that doesn't quite cut the mustard. So, Jesus homes in on Simon Peter and asks *Who do you say that I am?*

I wonder how you would direct this pivotal moment if it were a play or a film? Would there be a quizzical expression on Peter's face? A moment when nobody seems to know what to say? A longing look from Jesus wanting at least some sort of response?

Peter's answer has become one of the most famous moments of the Gospel, this is the confession he makes at Caesarea Philippi: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*

Upon hearing that statement, which Jesus obviously took as one of trust and belief, our Lord commissions Peter to become the rock on which the Church will be built.

Well, we are now just over half way through Matthew's gospel and the journey with Jesus has been a constant challenge and already there have been moments when this question has been asked.

It's rather like our order of service here at AFC. Every week it's split into three parts: God invites us to worship, we hear God's Word and then finally: Our response.

The Good News of God's Kingdom calls for a response.

I think the disciples were trying to make a positive one, they kept close to Jesus as a true student of a Rabbi would. And here at Caesarea, surrounded by a call to be true and faithful to a different kingdom, even if they are so obviously now located in a very Roman one, Jesus presses Peter even further. And Peter, still a work in progress, offers Jesus his belief and trust and says: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

And then, in Matthew at least, the focus shifts from Who is Jesus, to who is Peter?

Because, as if with an eye on succession planning after this short ministry of just three years, Jesus calls Peter the Rock on which he will build his Church.

Now, none of this runs quite as smoothly in Mark's account of Caesarea Philippi as it does in Matthew's. Because in Mark's briefer narrative, although Peter still makes this confession, the wheels fall off the bus pretty quickly afterwards

After being named as Messiah, Jesus speaks of the Messiah he intends to be: The Suffering Servant and The Crucified Christ. And Peter quickly rejects this interpretation. He rebukes Jesus who in turn rebukes him. That's the Markan narrative.

With so many expectations surrounding Messiahship, such a disagreement between Jesus and Peter is understandable. It's not the end for Peter, he still has so much to learn, and he will learn it. The story isn't finished, it's just midway through. After Jesus' words in Mark about a cross become a lived reality for Peter and the others, the important thing will be how they respond.

Today's Gospel is coupled with the reading we had earlier from Romans 12, one in which Paul speaks of all the different gifts found in a local congregation, gifts that when blended, enable it to be a good expression of God's love and life.

So, in a sense the Matthew reading talks of seeing God in Jesus whilst the one from Rome of seeing God in each other.

Of course, Peter is the wobbly disciple. Full of enthusiasm one moment and denial the next. At times he was something of a crumbling rock, as we all are. Yet, it is through, and sometimes despite our humanity, that something of God's love lives and shines today in God's Church.

Peter got a lot wrong, yet Jesus commissions and calls him.

Commenting on this passage Bishop John Spong says: *Peter could say the words, but he could not live the message. Not now, at least.*

Maybe he isn't so different from any of us.

How many times have we left a Sunday service inspired to live the week differently only to return the following Sunday frustrated that by Monday lunchtime we were once again battling with old demons.

Faith never comes fully formed.

Bit by bit Peter's understanding of Jesus changes, grows and deepens. His picture of who Jesus is may have been a bit out of focus at Caesarea, yet in the coming years it became sharper.

The National Portrait Gallery has just re-opened in London. After three years in storage, or in the restorer's workshop, hundreds of portraits have now been rehung.

Pictures of people that look as if they were painted yesterday. Some are like that because the restorers have painstakingly spent hours cleaning away the layers of grime that has dulled these pictures over the years. As these layers have been removed the painting has grown more interesting not less, more vibrant, more inspirational.

I sometimes think that about faith.

Inevitably it might have been layered with misunderstandings, traditional yet inadequate explanations and childlike concepts that need some work done on them.

As we think, as we seek to apply faith honestly to the experiences of life we go through then this painting of God we have in our mind is being changed and restored with some unhelpful layers wiped away.

To address these issues, even to reassess our understanding of God, need not be a negative, diminishing process – but rather like looking at an old painting now restored what we end up with is something brighter, more honest with a hidden beauty that actually inspires.

I believe Peter was on such a journey. At Caesarea Philippi, he expressed a deep faith and allegiance to Jesus as the Christ. That faith would indeed be tested. Peter would fail. That faith would have to accept new horizons and understandings. Peter would be reinstated and recommissioned. And in the end Peter will be sustained and energised by a faith that wasn't afraid to change. And in all of this God became bigger not smaller.

May that be our experience too. In the name of God, whose character was revealed to us in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.