

Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> August

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Who are you?

On the one level it's a perfectly innocuous question. But it also has the possibility to touch one to the core.

I am Paul. I am husband to Kate. Son to Stan and Audrey. Father to Tom, Chris and Hannah. I'm a vicar. I'm a Christian. I'm European; I'm British; I'm white.

And depending on the context of the question, those are the kinds of answers I would give.

But who am I? What defines my inner being? Not the roles I play, but the person I really am. The person only known fully to God, and partly to me myself.

That's a much more complex question. That's a question that would take me a long time to try to fathom out and answer. Countless novels have been written about characters finding themselves, finding out who they really are. Its intriguing and fascinating.

I heard a lovely story recently about identity.

*In 1983 a seven-year-old lad, in the days before First Class Lounges at airports, was with his grandad in Nice Airport and saw Roger Moore sitting at the departure gate, reading a paper. He told his granddad he'd just seen James Bond and asked if they could go over so he could get his autograph. His grandad had no idea who James Bond or Roger Moore were, so they walked over and he popped his grandson in front of Roger Moore, with the words "my grandson says you're famous. Can you sign this?"*

*As charming as you'd expect, Roger asks the lad's name and duly signs the back of his plane ticket, a fulsome note full of best wishes. Of course the young boy is ecstatic, but as they head back to their seats, he glances down at the signature. It's hard to decipher it but it definitely doesn't say 'James Bond'. His grandad looks at it, half figures out it says 'Roger Moore' – the young lad has absolutely no idea who Roger Moore is, and his heart sinks. He tells his grandad he's signed it wrong, that he's put someone else's name - so his grandad heads back to Roger Moore, holding the ticket which he's only just signed.*

*The boy's grandad said "he says you've signed the wrong name. He says your name is James Bond." Roger Moore's face crinkled up with realisation and he beckoned the lad over. When he was by his knee, he leant over, looked from side to side, raised an eyebrow and in a hushed voice said to him, "I have to sign my name as 'Roger Moore' because otherwise...Blofeld might find out I was here." He asked the lad not to tell anyone that he'd just seen James Bond, and he thanked him for keeping his secret. The boy went back to his seat, his nerves absolutely jangling with delight. His grandad asked him if he'd signed 'James*

*Bond.' No, he said. "I must have got it wrong. It wasn't James Bond". After all he was working with James Bond now.*

Knowing who someone is is not straightforward. We may know something about them, but not the whole picture, not who they really are.

So in the gospel reading today Jesus asks his disciples "Who do people say the Son of man is?" and by son of man he is referring to himself. It's a phrase he often used to identify himself.

Who do people say I am?

We'll think about the responses the disciples gave in a moment, but let's recall as well some of the things that we know were said about him elsewhere in the gospel accounts.

Nathaniel – when he heard about Jesus his only thought was about his home town. Can anything good come from Nazareth?

We read too of others who heard him, and immediately defined him in terms of his family. Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?

Others called him Rabbi or teacher, because they had heard – or heard of – his teaching.

And others, as the disciples recall here, said he was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It would seem people could only place Jesus by thinking about who he reminded them of. He's a bit like John or Elijah or Jeremiah or a prophet. Perhaps reminded by the way he looked, the things he taught and the authority he seemed to have.

So the response is mixed. Some place him by his family relationships, or his home town. Others by the reminders from the past. None it seems, could see the possibility of Jesus being something completely new.

And then the question to the disciples themselves. But who do you say that I am?

You have had the opportunity to see me, to hear me, to understand me at close hand. You've shared the experiences more than the others. They have caught a glimpse, but you have seen it all.

And Peter, so often the spokesperson for the group, is the one bold enough to answer. You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Its important to realise here what Peter is saying and what he isn't saying.

Peter was a Jew, brought up like all Jews with the expectation of the coming of the Messiah figure. And the expectation was of a King like figure who would lead the nation out of

oppression and bring justice and peace to the world. Many believed this Messiah figure would be like a king leading the troops into battle – a warrior king. And in Peter’s day that would involve liberating the nation from the Roman oppressors.

Others believed this King would purge the temple worship from all corruption and hypocrisy and establish true worship.

All believed he would fulfil the prophecies in scripture and usher in God’s kingdom, God’s rule on earth. But they didn’t know how exactly this would come about.

But Peter had identified something – the things Jesus did – miracles, healings, the words he said and the way he said them; the radical nature of his teaching, his confrontations with the authorities. What Peter had seen and experienced meant that he saw the Jesus must be this Messiah – this chosen one from God who would bring in God’s rule. He might not fit all the expectations or images that people had, but there was something about him. He was the Messiah. And we should remember that Christ is the Greek word for Messiah – it isn’t Jesus’ surname!

You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. I suspect that when we hear that today we think of the divinity of Jesus – the second person of the Trinity. But I doubt those thoughts were in Peter’s mind – at least not at this time. Those thoughts would come later, after the resurrection. No, what Peter was saying with the Son of the Living God phrase was that Jesus was a King like David. In a particular relationship with God. Essentially those two terms – Messiah and Son of the Living God – meant the same thing.

It’s important too to understand that at this stage neither Peter nor the other disciples had a full understanding of what all this meant. This is shown just a few verses later, as we peek into next Sunday’s gospel reading where we read that *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

What’s interesting is that when he hears this, Peter immediately says – *God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you.* Although he recognised that Jesus was the Messiah, he had no idea of what that meant. No idea of the real truth as to who Jesus was. That understanding came later for Peter.

That question of Jesus’s *Who do you say that I am.* Is as important today for us as it was for those first disciples. Only when we understand (or begin to understand) who Jesus is do we begin to see the truth and the power of the Christian message.

If the sum total of what we think about Jesus is that he was a good man, a worthy teacher, a peaceful protestor, a miracle worker, a setter of rules worth living by, a leader and an influence on others, or even a messenger from God or a prophet we are completely missing the truth and the life changing power of the gospel.

And this truth and power is not just in the fact that Jesus was the Messiah – we’ve seen already that, even though Peter knew this, initially he did not comprehend what it really

meant. It was in understanding the implications of Jesus dying on the cross, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven – that he is God. This is what changed the disciples.

Changed Peter from being the one who walked away on the eve of the day of crucifixion to the one who would stand before the authorities and declare that Jesus was risen from the dead. Changed Paul from being Saul the opponent of Christianity to Paul the preacher and teacher who still teaches and influences today. Changed countless individuals through history to live and sometimes die for their Lord.

The challenge is there for us all today. Who do you say that I am. Are we content with a half truth of him being a teacher and a good man, or are we ready to begin to believe and begin to understand who he really was.

C S Lewis once famously said

*I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. 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, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God*

We are beginning in October a discipleship course – details in the September magazine and in the pewslip in the next few weeks. If you want to clarify your beliefs on who Jesus was this could be just the thing for you. Please have a word with me.