

Sermon 26/08/26 Matthew 16:13-20

Who am I and what am I?

I was named after my great grandmother, although no one has ever told me why, and if it was in the hope that I should get to be like her, I don't know that it was a success. Because Sarah is after all just a name, it identifies both me and great granny but tells you nothing about either of us. Either our personalities or our achievements.

I suspect that most of us here today are old enough to be familiar with the humour of Flanders and Swann (the hippopotamus song) although maybe less familiar with the banter with which they introduced their singing. In one part a mother is berating her son for failure to comply with the norms of their culture because his father is 'the chief assistant to the assistant chief' and they have a position to maintain. And that is what apparently matters.

At first glance today's readings seem almost at odds with one another. Matthew is telling us about how people identified Jesus, and Paul is telling the Romans about how they should use their gifts.

Jesus begins by asking the disciples who people in general say that the Son of Man is, and the answers they give are fairly predictable – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah. But then he changes the question taking out all the ambiguity, 'Who do you

say that I am?' Peter answers apparently on behalf of them all that he is the Messiah. This answer pleases Jesus and Peter is promised much for the future, to be the rock of the church, to hold the keys of heaven. But is Messiah a name, a job title or a job description? We cannot know what is going on in Peter's head at the time, but from Jesus' reaction it is certainly more than a name, and probably more than a title. That one word sums up hopes and expectations of what Jesus will achieve. Interestingly in my Bible this passage is immediately followed by the heading, 'The first prediction of the Passion' and Peter is shocked to hear of Jesus impending death.

I often find St Paul annoyingly long winded so was pleased that in this passage from Romans he seems to avoid using too many words. It is all about what we do with what we have. 'We have been given different gifts, let us exercise them'. There is no mention of posh job titles or ceremony. People who lead are simply asked to lead with diligence. Work together for the whole community. Don't fret about whether or not you are the chief assistant to the assistant chief.

On the surface it all seems so easy, we have names – use them, some people have titles – it helps others to know what they do, we do what we do – as part of our church community. That does not mean we only do things within the Church but we can be seen as part of it.

Although not an issue here at St Johns I would challenge you to be able to tell me the name of every person in a service at St James where the congregation is both larger and more fluid. That does not excuse us – it is just a greater challenge. But in the context of a modern congregation names serve only as identifiers, the best way to distinguish one person from another. Resorting to comments like, usually wears red socks, is neither reliable nor helpful. And I'm not sure that I want to be remembered purely as the friend of someone else.

When Peter tells Jesus that he knows he is the Messiah he means more than a name, more than a title, a whole description of what his role is as the Son of God. Peter at this time does not fully understand himself but he knows that to be the case and that it will be revealed in the future. Jesus responds with a name change for Peter, again not just an identifier but a name that defines his future role. We are used to these significant name changes in the Bible, back in Genesis Abraham's wife Sarai was renamed Sarah. (Apparently both are forms of the Hebrew word for princess !) We Sarah's have been around a long time.

Peter is given the task of building the church and the keys to show his authority in doing it. The name is not some posh title but just a name to help others identify him, and to remind

himself of the task he has been set. A task which as we read on in the Bible we know he takes on.

Following on from Paul's reminder we also must use the talents we have been given in the best way that we can. It isn't always a good fit which is why churches are usually crying out for organists and treasurers but are more blessed with tea and cake makers. In the modern world it is often competent IT skills that are in short supply. But how do we know we are doing the right things?

One way in which we can judge our actions for ourselves is to consider how they would look if reported in subsequent, as yet unwritten, books of the Acts of the Apostles. Imaging reading, 'Sarah had been appointed to the role of Manager of Operational Scribing, but the congregation was unsure what she actually did'. I think I would prefer, 'Sarah sharpened the pencils'.

As St Paul points out we have different qualities and need to use well the ones we have. But as we don't always spot them ourselves sometimes we need a nudge in a certain direction, we need to take the plunge and try something new. A church congregation is one of the warmest places to make mistakes. There will always be someone commending your bravery even if they are not clapping your success.

This church here is one of the warmest places I know – we came the Sunday when Bernard’s heart operation was cancelled and didn’t know what to do with ourselves, this month I invited Messy Church here without really asking – the building and its people have a way of wrapping yourselves around us and hugging, of just being.

Whatever we are doing, whether here or out in the parish let’s make sure that it will make good reading if those further books of Acts are eventually written.