

Proper 16 Year A 2020

Happy as I am to be here today, it will give me great joy, next Sunday, to preach to a 'real' congregation, and to celebrate communion for those people present - even though there will be no singing, no wine, no physical contact at the peace. Being a priest is a huge privilege and responsibility, and a constant source of joy, sometimes of pain and frequently of frustration. Not many people aspire to priesthood, and many who do are told NO by the church - we don't think God is calling you to this vocation - I was told NO three times, but I can be very obstinate - like the Canaanite woman we met last week - and at the fourth attempt - over three dioceses and two provinces - and after 14 years of banging on the door, I was finally ordained deacon and a year later priest, and every day I thank God for this call and this blessing.

I can tell you now that Saint Peter would never, never ever, have been given a recommendation for training for ordained ministry. To begin with, look where he came from - Galilee - Galilee of the nations, nowhere near proper enough. (*sniff*) Look at his father - a fisherman; and Peter was also a fisherman - no proper education and not a proper profession (*sniff*) - even today the chances of

someone without a degree being ordained are practically nil. My Open University degree counted just, but was sniffed at - but that was thirty years ago; I think things have changed a little - but I hadn't been to University! (*sniff*). And imagine his Galilean accent! How can you be a church leader with an accent like that? My English midland vowels don't go down too well with some people, not even in England - especially in England.

And apart from all that, look at Peter himself. He tried to walk on water, but doubted and nearly drowned. He tells Jesus 'You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God' - but when Jesus tells the disciples what will happen in Jerusalem, he says 'God forbid', and is rebuked - 'Get behind me, Satan'. He doesn't want his feet washed, because he cannot understand the concept of leadership as service. He vows that he will never desert Jesus, and then runs away and three times denies that he knows him. After the crucifixion, he deserts Jerusalem and goes back to Galilee - I am going fishing - it is all over and I am going back to what I used to do before all this stuff happened. And yet, and yet, this is the man who is chosen to lead the disciples after Jesus leaves them - Peter, feed my sheep; on this rock I will build my church. Permission to bind and to loose - to forbid or to permit. If this Peter can be a leader of Christ's church - well, there is hope for all of us. Because, as members of the Body of

Christ, we are all called to be ministers of the Gospel. We might not always take God seriously, or seriously enough, but, thank God, God always takes us seriously - and chooses to involve us in his divine plan - and invites us to work out that plan with Him, and through our participation - and he uses both our strengths and our weaknesses.

There are two questions in today's Gospel reading. The first is 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' In Matthew's Gospel, 'The Son of Man' is the title Jesus uses about himself. The disciples had heard the gossip - John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. But of course they knew that none of these was true. Then the real question - here in Caesarea Philippi - well away from Jerusalem and his opponents' territory, where they could speak openly - 'Who do you say that I am?' Peter speaks up for them all - 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

The Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, had been promised for centuries. We heard the promise in our first reading. 'A teaching will go out from me. My justice for a light to the peoples'. The disciples had heard and seen those promises coming true, in the life, teaching and action of Jesus. The deaf could hear, the lame could walk, the blind could see, the marginalised had been accepted, even welcomed. Peter had seen

and drawn his own conclusions - he knew this man in front of him was the Christ, the Messiah, the one promised.

Now today, we are faced with the same question. Who do you say that he is? We could echo Peter - or we could say many other things. Paul says Jesus is the power of God, the wisdom of God, the image of the unseen God. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews offers 'the radiant light of God's glory,' 'the perfect copy of his nature'. St John says he is a light that shines in darkness. Jesus himself calls himself the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth and the Light. What do all these titles mean? Every time he says I AM, Jesus is asserting his relationship to the God who told Moses I AM WHO I AM, 'Who do you say that I am?' That is not only a question to the disciples, or even to Peter. It is a question to each one of us. Who do you say that Jesus is? What part does Jesus play in your life? You don't have to go through an emotional and painful selection process to begin to form an answer to that question. It is asked of each and every one of us. Who is Jesus to you? for you? What difference does it make to your life, having Jesus as part of it? Is he your Good Shepherd, is he the light in your times of darkness? Does he show you the way, the way you should live.

We are all called to follow Christ in our own way, using the gifts we have been given. Some of those gifts might be public - like preaching - some might be private, intercessory prayer, visiting - I have a friend who sends out cards - not just for Christmas or birthdays, but anniversaries of every kind - years mind, sickness, just thinking of you today, remember last year? Cards - almost every day, and so much appreciated. We have gifts which differ according to the grace given to us, Paul writes. We need not only to exercise those gifts but also to recognise and encourage each other's gifts. Paul lists some of the gifts we are given - prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, cheerfulness - none of these have 'ordination' added to them - and in other places he adds other gifts - so many ways of living out our calling as brothers and sisters of Christ - ways of being the Body of Christ. 'Who do you say that I am?'

I was going to say 'Go home and think about that', but of course you are at home, so after this service has ended, spend a few minutes thinking about this question 'Who do you say that I am?' and then ask yourselves another question - how does that affect my life, my work, my relationships - and are there any dark corners of my life into which I should bring the Light of the world?