

Year A Proper 21. 23rd August 2026

Isaiah 51:1-6. Romans 12: 1-8. Matthew 16: 13-20

But who do YOU say that I am? Hardly your 'starter for 10', is it? That zinger of a question was the most important the disciples were ever asked by Jesus.

What a relief it is to find Peter getting it right for once, in fact it's about the only thing Peter does get right in all the Gospels.

The fact that Peter gets something right is actually by the by. It's the truth he is pointing to – that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God – that matters. A truth that matters as much today as it did then, a revelation reinforced by 2,000 years of experience. And that matters too, because our understanding of Messiah is so different from Peter's because we have the advantage of hindsight.

Peter's response is a revelation from God, Jesus tells him. It may be an incomplete revelation, yet it's enough for Jesus to say that it's the rock on which his church will be founded. I say that with some caution because theologians and scholars disagree a lot on this. The Catholics obviously think it refers to Peter himself, but even outside the Catholic Church, some think it relates to Peter and others to Peter's proclamation.

Certainly the Greek words for rock and church are both feminine, whereas Petros, the name Jesus gives to Simon, is masculine. This is an argument I am staying out of!

What does matter, whatever your interpretation, is that Peter's answer stemmed from a gift of faith. In our reading from Romans Paul also talks about gifts. That's the point they are gifts, gifts from God, not talents we have developed through our own efforts. Gifts are something to be grateful for, not proud of.

What is incumbent on all of us is to identify those gifts God has given us and use them to his glory and in his service. We all have different gifts, and we need to accept them for what they are and not be envious of the ones we don't have.

While Peter got it right this once we should never forget that just three verses after the end of today's reading, Jesus says those shocking words 'Get thee behind me, Satan' after his impetuous disciple says going to Jerusalem to die is not what being a Messiah is about.

Peter's reaction to Jesus forecasting his impending death was not that surprising. Jewish expectations for their Messiah included the overthrow of their oppressors, currently the Romans, so what better place for Jesus to confirm that he was the long-awaited Messiah than in Caesarea Philippi, where a massive monument to Roman rule and authority had been built by Herod the Great in honour of Caesar Augustus, the self-declared Son of God? So how on earth could Jesus die and be the Messiah?

I don't think it was coincidence that Jesus asked this question at Caesarea Philippi. Not only did it symbolise Roman power, but there were also sanctuaries honouring the Greek God Pan as well as Ba'al and it was also an important economic centre. It was a place where power, religion and trade intersected.

By asking that question at that particular place, he was also challenging them as to where their allegiance lay. Was it man and power, was it other religions? It was if Jesus demanded to be compared to them and wanted to know just where they were going to put their trust?

Nevertheless, the main thrust of this passage is about identity – first and foremost Jesus's identity, but also the disciples' identity and our identity. Jesus starts with the easy question to his disciples – who do they say that I am? In other words what are people saying about me?

And the answers that come back probably don't surprise us that much. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets – answers that probably reflected the biases of the anonymous disciples who answered Jesus' original question.

That second question is probably the most important question Jesus asked in his earthly lifetime and continues to ask today. Because what it asked the disciples in effect was – Why are you following me, why have you given everything up? And it asks us – Why DO we follow a Galilean carpenter who lived 2,000 years ago, who do WE say Jesus is?

It's asking us are we willing to stake everything on red on the roulette wheel. One plausible interpretation of the Parable of the Talents is that the returning master, i.e. Jesus, wasn't interested in how much money they had made, but was much more interested in how much business they had transacted in his absence – in other words how willing were they to nail their colours to the mast of someone they weren't sure was a winner or a loser. The money they made was a consequence of their take, but it wasn't the purpose of the exercise.

There are all sorts of ways of answering that question –It's a question we have to sit with, a question we all need to ask ourselves regularly, because the answer isn't always going to be the same, it will change according to circumstances. Because God is not a static God, a God of the past. He is the living God, the God of both the present and the future, as well as the past.

It's not enough to hide behind 'well the Scottish Episcopal Church says...', or Bishop Mark says, or Bishop Dagmar says, or Nick says, or Peter says. It's a very personal question that only individuals can answer for themselves, it's a question that doesn't have one unchanging answer. But not only do we have to answer that question for ourselves, but we also have to be able to answer it on those occasions when we get asked it by others – directly or indirectly

It wouldn't be right to say we should all ask ourselves that question and then duck it myself, but it's not easy to put it into words. To me Jesus is God's way of saying how precious each one of us is to Him. Jesus is God's way of saying if you find it hard to grasp what I am like then look at Jesus. Jesus is God's way saying that He wants to be in relationship with me. Jesus is God's way of saying you may not think you're up to much, but I do. Jesus is God's way of saying that He is much more interested in what we can be than what we have been or what we are. Jesus is God's way of saying I want to set you free Jesus is God's way of saying He has a plan for the world in which we can hope and trust. Above all Jesus is God's way of saying that ultimately love will win.

That's just my take, you will all answer the question differently. I hope you will take the time to try to answer it in your own way in your own time because it's not a question we can ignore. After all, He is the living God, and as much as we need God, God also needs us given he has chosen human beings to be his instrument to bring about justice in this fallen world. Being God's agent is not something we can just leave to somebody else. We're all in this, by giving our

allegiance to Jesus he has chosen us to help put the world to rights. Scary thought!

Because our answer does not just lie in our words or our thoughts, it also lies in our lives. To echo Peter's answer and adopt it as our own means living lives that treat others fairly, lives that choose mercy over being right, justice over status, loving our neighbours as ourselves and not walking by on the other side.

It means helping to set others free from the fads of our day, from the empires of our times. It means helping to set people free from fear, and let's face it millions and millions of people live in fear of one thing or another. And that's just in our country. Yet we say in our confession every week There is no room for fear in love. We love because He loved us first.

Do we live like that? I suspect, if we're honest, that generally the answer is we don't.

And as we wrestle with Who do YOU say that I am, bear in mind that there are so many associated questions that may spring to mind, not least who am I, who do I want to be. What are those demons that tell me I can't be what I want to be, that I am not enough?

Perhaps what it ultimately comes down to is this. – Do we stand on Peter's accurate but theoretical answer or on Thomas' My Lord and My God in the Upper Room? Or on something completely different?

Is Jesus THE Messiah or is Jesus YOUR Messiah?