

The Answer that Counts

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:13-25 ESV)

Christians believe that the question about Jesus’ identity is the most important question to be asked on the planet and the answer is literally a matter of life and death. Jesus asks it when he is about as far north as traditional Israel goes – remembering Jerusalem is in the south – and it is part of his disciples’ lesson in understanding him. The answers come and they have a ‘theme’ of ‘others say – returning prophets sent by God’. Jesus then zeroes in for their own answer and Peter gives it and Jesus accepts it! Our text is a key text for Jesus’ identity as the divine Messiah, the Christ and also for the importance and place of Peter in the church and the work of the keys – forgiving or retaining sins. The Roman Catholic Church has this text as a key one for Petrine supremacy and the role of the papacy while both the Orthodox Church and the Reformation and post Reformation churches have alternative views about the text – less emphasis on Peter and more on his confession of faith and what comes from it.

I assume we all think that Peter just had a blinding flash of intuition that came out of the blue. Jesus says that it was a revelation from his Father in heaven. As I said, our Confessions say that it is the answer that is critical rather than the person who said it. But then Jesus goes on in our text in a way that he doesn’t as recorded in Mark and Luke and speaks directly to Peter as rock and on this rock Jesus will build his church and we’re back to the various interpretations again.

But the scene intrigues me, more so after I considered it from a ‘Farside’ point of view. What if Peter’s answer is not the smart, intuitive one but rather a mischievous one, a sarcastic one even, meant more as a joke even – and Peter then is gobsmacked because he doesn’t get the reaction of shock or disapproval he’s expecting but finds Jesus basically saying ‘Yep, you’re right!’ then the scene takes on another dimension. We have no recording of Peter’s voice and we have no insight into his mind at the time. We do know that he tries to persuade Jesus not to go the path of the cross when Jesus explains what being the Messiah means and that he even gets called Satan for his attempt to deflect Jesus from the cross.

Peter is portrayed in pulpits as bold, tempestuous, rash. He walks on water and goes under. He denies Jesus when he said he’d die with Jesus. He gets things wrong – think of his slipping back into the Jewish enclave mentality in relation to the Gentiles over which he and Paul had a fight – check out Galatians 2. He doesn’t pick things up quickly – both he and John saw the empty tomb but Jesus’ resurrection only ‘clicked’ for John – see John 20. And so for Peter to be the smart cookie just doesn’t fully gel with me but that’s not important. What is important is the answer – the words – You are the Christ, the Son of the living God – which even if said with less than perfect motives can still be truth from God. If God can make Balaam’s donkey speak truth, if Paul can write in Philippians 1 that he is happy that Christ is proclaimed in every way (even if some

do it from envy and rivalry) then my hypothetical about Peter's answer just might be true. Even if Peter's answer is 'crazy' it is still true and it also gives me a reason for Jesus' direct comment to Peter.

It is a contextual moment – a teaching moment – similar to when the teacher in the classroom is able to turn the tables on a rascal student and get the whole class to learn. So if Peter's answer is for whatever reason a scandalous one then Jesus takes it, runs with it, and points out that as the Messiah he will build his church and it will continue to do his work in the world – deal with sin – and the disciples will have a key role in it. I imagine that they are taking notice – Peter very much so – but it's all still confusing and perhaps unnerving and so Jesus tells them not to broadcast this news ... yet ... while he paints out the detail, the fine print so to speak, what being the Christ means and what following the Christ is all about. This is what trips Peter up. Jesus' message doesn't square with what he thinks Jesus message should be. And isn't that the case with this world and God and his Word. Did God really say? The words in the Bible – the Word made flesh – are all so important that what we are to do first is to listen.

G K Chesterton suggested that all empires and kingdoms have failed because they were founded by strong men upon strong men and the reason the Christian Church is still around today is because Peter who was not as brilliant as Paul or as mystical as John but was rather a shuffler, a snob, and a coward – in a word, a man – was weak. For this reason the Christian Church is indestructible because no chain is stronger than its weakest link.¹ I think Chesterton's idea is corrected but the focus really isn't Peter – though he helps the argument – rather the focus needs to go onto the cross where we see a weak and abandoned man crying out in torment and then I am drawn to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians: *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor 4:7-11)*

We are here today because the answer to the question of Jesus' identity continues to be told from one weak generation to the next and the gates of Hades, the power of death, has not snuffed it out, and forgiveness is still being granted and where Jesus is rejected sins are still retained. The world is seduced by power and strength and having a rally cry of "Jesus, you are the Messiah the Son of the living God and you're on my side" might even make Christians – for we still live in this world – try and turn Jesus into our cosmic vending machine. But when we are confronted again and again with our own weakness, our sins, our timidity in sharing the good news and when we are confronted Sunday by Sunday with Jesus in power and glory but all we see is a human weak pastor, water, bread and wine and a cross then we are left only with the words about Jesus and from Jesus to us.

"You are my child in the waters of baptism."

"I forgive you. Go and sin no more."

"Take and eat; take and drink."

"Peace be with you."

"Love as I have loved you."

The words about Jesus – and his words to us – are the foundation, the rock, upon which we stand. We may say them in all sorts of situations with a mixture of faith and doubt, in anger and despair, in joy and ecstasy, and in the ordinariness of life. We and those words will often appear weak but the Christian Church continues to grow and is ready to greet her Lord when he comes through Word and Sacraments and when he finally comes for everyone to see. The Church is ready to answer the question and share that answer with the world.

¹ G K Chesterton, (1905). Heretics. (Ch 4 – Mr Bernard Shaw) p.31