

Jesus said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

I don't know how many of you have had contact with an Alpha Course. If you have you will know the second session is 'Who is Jesus?'. It begins with a 'Vox pop' video of responses to that question, from people randomly stopped in the street. Among the responses recorded were:

- a person who lived ages ago
- a teacher, much like other great teachers
- a good guy, I guess
- he was a prophet
- I know the name but to be honest with you I don't really know anything about him

At the centre of our gospel reading the question is posed by Jesus to his disciples: who do people say that I am? Then more personally: who do **you** say I am? What name do you give me? The disciples had been travelling with Jesus for a while and their understanding of who Jesus was, was still growing. They had witnessed many healings, listened to his teaching, heard religious leaders question his authority, and seen miracles of power over nature, causing them to ask who is this that even the wind and sea obey him? But they were still learning, still trying to work it out.

At first, they repeated what other people were saying: some say John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah – all great prophets of God. But Peter took that leap of faith: 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. And Jesus gave him the blessing and commission: on this rock of confession I will build my church. Notice, there is nothing here about a physical building, but rather a body of believing people that Paul, writing to the Romans and Corinthians, would give a new name, the Body of Christ.

This new name is inherited by all who confess: 'Jesus is the Son of the living God' and is both a privilege and a responsibility. As the Body of Christ, we are called in turn to make him known in the world, to build his church. It may seem a daunting task and we often feel we do not have what it takes. But take courage from the fact that many of the great prophets and leaders felt the same when God called them: Jeremiah, was convinced he was too young, Abraham thought he was too old, Moses thought he had no skill with words. And Peter thought he was just an ordinary fisherman.

But God can see way beyond the limitations we think we have. Long before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah wrote: 'Listen says the Lord, he who created you. Don't be afraid, for I have redeemed you: I have called you by name, you are mine'. These were words given for the nation of Israel, but we can also hear them spoken to us individually. "Do not be afraid - I have called you by name". God already knows each of us by name - and knows everything there is to know about us. And even knowing everything, still loves us, still calls us to be the Body of Christ, trusting us to make his name known.

Jesus, even knowing everything about Peter still loved him, called him the rock, and entrusted him with his church. Peter had the courage to take that step of faith and name Jesus as the Messiah. Yet it was the same Peter who continued to struggle to grasp the true nature of Jesus' mission, went on to deny Jesus three times on the night of his arrest, didn't know what to do after seeing the risen Christ so went back to Galilee to go fishing and later had a fierce disagreement with Paul about whether the gospel was also for Gentiles. Jesus founded the church on the testimony of a man who repeatedly found himself in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. Peter became the rock of the church not because he deserved it or for anything he did – but simply by God's grace. So, if we are ever tempted to say that we are not good enough to be part of this great work of God, - we would do well to remember the man named Peter.

We do not know what the others might have said individually. When the disciples repeated what people were saying, they were not wrong, but they were still learning that it is not enough to believe that Jesus is important, or a good person, a good teacher, or even like other messenger prophets. Jesus was God's message of love and salvation for the people he loved - the Messiah, Son of the living God.

Jesus invites us, just as he invited those first disciples, to confess who we believe he is – not for his sake, but because he wants each one of us to be part of building his kingdom and become part of his church. Whatever our role in life, or the church, our starting point is how we answer that question: who is Jesus? The answer must be our own, and not one borrowed from someone else. And it may be that as we grow in learning more about him, we frame it in different ways. But once we have made that step of faith, we are all in it together, as Paul says: “In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others”. And together we are to be ‘living’ sacrifices” - not as martyrs through death, but through the way we live our everyday lives – through our love of neighbour, seeking justice, caring for one another.

Exactly how we do that also may change over time. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said from his war-time prison cell, the central question for the church in his time was the same for every generation to come: Who do we say Jesus is? - and how the church had answered that question before the war, he said, would not be the same after the war. While Jesus remains the same Son of the living God, and the call to follow does not change, maybe how we are church must change for us too, in the context of all that is going on in the world around us. How we preach the gospel in a world where more and more say ‘I know the name but ...’ may demand we learn different approaches, different ways of communicating his word. As Peter declared Jesus was the Son of the **living** God. God is still living, still moving, still working through his people in the world, and part of our responsibility as the Body of Christ is to discern and respond to how God is moving among us now. As Paul reminded the Romans, we are each given gifts to do this whether in leadership, serving, teaching, encouraging, or simply in being who God has made us to be. Never underestimate how your presence and how you live can be an encouragement to the faith journeys of others.

Jesus said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’

There may be many who respond, “I know the name but” and many who might not even know the name. But we who do know the name and have come to confess the truth of who he is should never be afraid to proclaim it in whatever way God leads us. And God will add his blessing - for surely the world needs to know his name and everything about him, now as much, if not more, than ever.

Living God,  
Draw us deeper into your love;  
Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve;  
Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news.  
Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us to live your love  
with generosity and joy, imagination and courage;  
for the sake of your world and in the name of Jesus,  
Amen.

Ruth Goatly