

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE - SUNDAY 23rd AUGUST 2020

INTRODUCTION

There are some things that just can't be learnt from books or from other people's experience. Let's take learning to driving a car as an example. Until you have actually sat in the driver's seat and taken full control of the vehicle you cannot possibly understand or fully appreciate what it is to drive a car. A Highway Code may well enhance your understanding of vehicular control and road safety awareness but until you have actually experienced that first drive by yourself, for yourself, no amount of reading or listening to other people will suffice.

*Which is why Jesus' question to the disciples in the Gospel reading today is so important. Because it's all about personal experience. As a gentle entrée Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do **people** say that the Son of Man is?" And after a few responses he prompts them further, "But who do **you** say that I am?" It is Peter who jumps in with a response – which is often referred to as his testimony. Because Peter hasn't just learned who Jesus is – rather he has experienced him first-hand and now recognises exactly who he is.*

Jesus' question is just as powerful for you and me today as it was for his disciples then. The way we think about God will change the way we relate to Him, and can transform our lives. As St Paul reminds us: "let God transform you into a new person

by changing the way you think". So pause for a moment now to reflect on this: Who is Jesus for you? What does he mean to you? And are you open to the possibility of growing into a deeper understanding of him as you come to worship?

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the beginning
before time, before people,
before the world began,

GOD WAS.

Here and now
among us, beside us,
enlisting the people of earth
for the purposes of heaven,

GOD IS.

In the future,
when we have turned to dust
and all we know has found its fulfilment,

GOD WILL BE.

Not denying the world but delighting in it,
not condemning the world, but redeeming it,
through Jesus Christ,
by the power of the Holy Spirit,

**GOD WAS,
GOD IS,
GOD WILL BE.**

TURNING TO GOD

We come to God as one from whom no secrets are hidden,
To ask his forgiveness and peace.

You made us to be one family,
Yet we have divided humanity.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

You were born a Jew to reconcile all people,
yet we have brought disharmony amongst races.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

You rejoice in our differences,
yet we make them a cause of enmity.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Silence

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour
forgive us our sins
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

LISTENING TO THE WORD

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 12:1-8 New Living Translation)

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one

body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well.

So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well.

If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 16:13-20 NRSV)

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, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will

give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Stephen Malkinson)

A Job interview often starts with an easy non challenging question, something like 'Tell us something about yourself.' After that the questions can become more challenging!

It is that technique that Jesus used when he arrived in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus began by asking his disciples a simple question: 'Who do people say that I am?' The disciples repeated to him what they had heard: 'Some say that you are carrying on the work of John the Baptist, others say that you are Elijah come back to us' (because, as you remember, he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire). Others thought that he was Jeremiah or one of the prophets come back to life. Then comes Jesus' difficult question: 'But who do YOU say that I am'? Perhaps the disciples thought that at least he must be very close to God as no-one could say or do the things that Jesus did without some direct divine help. It's possible they could not go any further than that. Except for Peter. He announces: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!' We can imagine at that moment that Jesus must have been

surprised and yet delighted by Peter's confession, because it seemed to come out of nowhere.

Peter's confession reminds us of the other two announcements about Jesus. One was at his Baptism: 'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased', and the other at the Transfiguration, which says much the same but adds: 'Listen to him'. Jesus knew that God his Father was using Peter to tell the disciples who he really was. No wonder Jesus says: 'Blessed are you Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven.'

Peter's confession became the true foundation for his ministry and work. 'You are Peter' (from the Greek πέτρος [Petros] meaning a stone or rock) 'and on this bedrock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'. It is upon this confession that the Christian church was indeed built after Jesus' Ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - in fact we call Pentecost the birthday of the church.

As you know, members of the early church were frightened and persecuted. It wasn't until the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity that the Christian church became accepted. Until then they had to be careful in acknowledging their faith to others. One way was by using the sign of the fish. One person would draw an arc and the other Christian would respond by drawing another upside down arc that would intersect to form the tail of a fish.

The Greek word for a fish is ΙΧΘΥΣ (ICHTHUS) which as an acronym stands for Jesus (I) Christ (CH) the Son of God (TH,U) our Saviour (S). This was the statement of faith on which the church was built, and it is the bedrock upon which we build our faith. Our faith in Jesus can be firmly held on the rock of St Peter and the symbol of the fish.

Perhaps today we can think about a reply to Jesus when he asks each one us: 'Who do YOU say that I am'? Maybe an answer is to be found in verse of the following hymn:

All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.

God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.

RESPONDING TO GOD

Let us declare our trust and faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PSALM 138 (adapted from *The Manhattan Psalter*)

I'll thank you, God, thank you with all my heart.
My song of praise will put even the angels to shame.

**Prostrate in the dust before your holy temple, my cries of
gratitude for your great mercy, for your very Being, will
ring in the ears of all who behold me.**

You've gone far, far beyond my greatest expectations,
outdone even Yourself. Your answer to my pleading has me
bursting with exultation, my soul can hardly bear it.

**Rulers who hear of you will join in thanksgiving; they too
will sing loudly, praising the ways of the Lord because the
glorious Lord is great.**

He may be in heaven on high, but he watches over the lowly
and scrutinizes the ways of the proud and the arrogant.

**Whenever troubles come down on me, you give me hope.
Soon my enemies are in flight and I'm rescued.**

God has begun a great work in me and will see it to its perfect
accomplishment.

**O God, your mercy is endless;
you'll never abandon any of your creatures.**

Thanks be to God

TALKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray
to the Lord:

Lord, we present ourselves to you.
You give us life, you give us love, you give us yourself.
May we give our lives, our love, ourselves to you.
We pray for the unity of the church,
that we may work together for the good of all.
We give thanks for the many gifts you have given us;
let us use them to your glory.
We pray especially for all who exercise the gifts of ministry,
teaching, and healing.

Silence

Christ, Son of the Living God,
hear us and help us.

We pray for all people, that their talents and abilities
may be able to be used.
Bless each in their vocation and work.
We remember those who have been made redundant,
And the unemployed.
We pray for those whose work is unfulfilling,
And for all who feel their talents are wasted.

Silence

Christ, Son of the Living God,
hear us and help us.

Bless our homes with holiness and hospitality,
with cheerfulness and kindness,
with generosity and goodness.
We pray for our loved ones, our neighbours and our friends,
the communities to which we belong and the places where we
work.

Silence

Christ, Son of the Living God,

hear us and help us.

We pray for all who have no confidence in themselves or in
the world,
and all who find making relationships difficult.
We remember the lonely,
and those who have been rejected or betrayed.
We pray for all who are in trouble, need, sickness,
or any other adversity.
And in a moment now, we offer you the people on our own
hearts.

Silence

Christ, Son of the Living God,
hear us and help us.

We give thanks for all who have been strengthened by their
faith,
and for all who have died in faith.
Remembering the recently departed and those whose
anniversary of death falls at this time:
Eric Gething, John Pritchard, Cecil Miller.
Lord, grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

Silence

Christ, Son of the Living God,

hear us and help us.

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Pause for Reflection – OFFERING OURSELVES TO GOD

We have heard St Paul urging us: "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." Reflect for a few moments on what truth God has revealed to you as you have worshipped Him, and ask Him to allow it to transform you in the days ahead.

Silence

SENDING

We go into the world
to walk in God's light,
to rejoice in God's love
and to reflect God's glory.

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

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