**23rd August 2020**



**Call to worship**

When Jesus asked, Simon Peter answered:
‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’
Let us make the same bold answer,
and let us come together to worship
Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.
**Amen.**

**HYMN: Jesus is Lord**



**A gathering prayer**

Lord, do we really believe that we are in the presence of the Son of the Living God?
Still our hearts now,
so that we may truly appreciate who you are.
As we hear these words of power,
we bow down before you and praise you.
**Amen**.



**A prayer of approach**

‘This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood,
but by my Father in heaven.’

The Lord blessed Simon
because he finally understood who Jesus was.
He called him Peter,
and said that great things would come to pass through him.
He promised him the keys to the kingdom.

Lord, we already have so many keys on our bundles.
Help us to find the right ones
to open the doors you choose for us.

Make us ready to be like Simon,
and to become Peter,
doing great things in your strength
and for your kingdom.
**Amen**.



**A prayer of confession**

Lord, thank you that you are always ready to forgive me
when I trust you enough to confess my sins to you,
even when I feel I don’t deserve it.
**Be merciful to me, O God.**

Forgive me for the times when
just because someone else’s story is different from mine
I don’t always want to believe it.
Forgive me for the times I only live my story,
not seeing the bigger picture.
**Be merciful to me, O God.**

Forgive me for the times
I see you as less than the Son of God,
and my whole outlook on life
needs a good dose of your love and understanding.
**Be merciful to me, O God.**
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration and thanksgiving**

Lord God, we come before you in humble adoration. How blessed are we that the one who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven is the one who has the key to our hearts. Thank you, God, for the privilege of being part of the amazing story of faith that sustained our ancestors. Thank you, God, that we know our future is safe with you. **Amen.**



Matthew 16.13-20

So, I was 16 years old when someone had the courage and temerity to ask me ‘Who is Jesus for you Simon’. I grew up in Burnley just in case you didn’t know that. My parents went to a United Reformed Church in the town.

For much of my teenage life I had three objections to Christianity.

It was boring: from my experience of attending church I thought it was only for old ladies who wear hats and tell you off for not keeping quiet. Religion was for women not men. Church services were dull, somber and cold – like a funeral without a coffin.

It was untrue: Christmas summed it up: the birth of Jesus and Father Christmas. Both were on the par of fairy tales – nice stories but not based in reality. Creation in seven days, Noah’s Ark, water into wine? All farfetched.

It was irrelevant – the greatest expression of faith that the church I knew best could offer was to have a jumble sale to get others to pay for their leaking roof. Twee hymns like all things bright and beautiful just didn’t connect with the the stuff of life: work, pressure, relationships. Christianity was anti –sex, anti-fun. The death bit (heaven and all that) was OK but I was young so I thought that could wait until I’m older. In the meantime Id have some fun now.

I guess if I was a teenager now I may also think that faith and religion was also dangerous – it could turn you into an intolerant bigot who goes around discriminating against people.

And yet I think deep down, now, looking back, I would say that something was missing. I didn’t go around at the time saying, ‘Something’s missing!’ But why I say that is because I wasn’t really living the moment, I wasn’t living the day; I was always looking forward to something else: you know, ‘When I get *this*, then I’ll be happy. Maybe *this* is the answer.’

If I get a good education I could get a good job. If I get a good job I could get a good car. If I get a good car I could get a nice girlfriend (its shallow but a lot of people think like that). The girlfriend could become a wife; we could get a house; we could have kids; I would get old; have grandkids; and then I’d die. What was it all about? There’s got to be more to life?

As I said I was not that interested in the church but went along to the church youth club, played pool, table tennis, messed around a bit. Then this girl caught my eye. She had become a ‘Christian’ – which was a bit of a rethink on my part because I thought we were all Christians because we lived in a Christian country right? This was back in the 1980’s when we weren’t quite as secular and squeamish about Christianity as we perhaps are today as a society.

I wanted to get to know this girl, this was in the days before dating apps: you had to do it the hard way – you had to actually ask a girl out. She was more than willing to take me out to her Christian meetings! I knew how to have fun! The funny thing was though that I got quite interested in the discussions and the talks. They were talking about the stuff of life: the big questions – why are we here? what is the point of life? What happens when we die? Is there a God? How can you know God? And who is Jesus?

After one of those meetings the speaker cornered me. ‘Who do you think Jesus is Simon?’ he asked. Well I mumbled ‘My mum thinks he is love. My Dad thinks he is the Lord. Your talk tonight made me think a bit more – it was remarkably interesting’. It was obvious that I was flannelling him – waffling away to avoid committing myself. ‘No but who is Jesus to you?’ he persisted.

I had seen the difference that Jesus had made in the girl I was attracted to. Maybe it was Jesus in her that I was attracted to that I was coming around to admit. It was so uncool then, it is still so uncool now, to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, to be someone who says Jesus is Lord, Jesus is my Lord. WE had so many hang-ups about making that step of commitment in the 1980s – things have not changed 40 years later.

We think becoming a Christian will make our lives boring or restricitive.

The way of Jesus is not boring. More has been written about his life and more has been done in his name than arguably anyone else in world history. Christianity can be boring if you hang round boring fearful people. There are all types of Christians and all types of churches. They are not all necessarily dull and boring. I had to challenge my ageist attitudes and discover than some Older People have led and are leading amazing lives in the name of Christ. Never judge a book by its cover’ is the saying – but we all do. The church is the greatest advert for the Christian faith and the way of Jesus. Like all adverts it can be a good advert or a bad advert: it does depend on your experience. I went to University and discovered some positive experiences of Christianity which questioned my previous prejudices.

I became aware of the adventure of following the way of Jesus. In the 1980s It inspired people such as Desmond Tutu to stand against apartheid, Mother Teresa to work with the poor of Calcutta. Closer to home I could see the commitment of the youth club leaders at the church youth club I went to. We gave them a lot of stick, and whilst I’m sure they wanted us to come to faith, their love was unconditional. They were just gracious, generous individuals.

Another church was helping the homeless, another was involved in justice issues and helping the developing world.

I could see how Christianity was making a difference to people’s lives – giving them a strong belief and conviction to stand on and act from. Some Christians I knew had more adventure in their lives than I did. Their relationship to God made the difference.

Now I was being challenged: ‘what about you? Will you let Jesus make a difference in your life?’

I didn’t respond that night. I never respond to someone pushing me a decision. I always take time out to consider.

But here I am. A minister of Jesus Crist. He got me. It was not without a struggle. We men like to be Lord of our own lives you know. We also like to be skeptical and non-committal about most things - apart from following your football team. It took me a while to investigate the evidence and the claims of Christianity. I didn’t want to take a blind leap of faith but I was willing to take a step of faith based on historical evidence and testimony of those who I had come to respect and see Jesus in their lives. The book ‘The Case for Christ’ was really helpful for me, by Lee Strobel, who was an atheistic journalist in Chacgo who set out to prove jesus didn’t exist and ended up coming to faith. If you don’t read books they’ve made it into a movie – its free if you have Amazon Prime: the Case for Christ.

Christians believe that Jesus is the beginning and end of life: in Greek, the Alpha and Omega: the resurrection and the life. He holds the key to life. And so, for us there is no more important question in life than who is Jesus for you?

C.S. Lewis put it like this:

‘Christianity is a statement which, if it’s false, is of no importance; and if it’s true, it’s of infinite importance. The one thing it can’t be is moderately important.’

For 2000 years, billions of people have believed in Jesus Christ. Our western calendar is dated from his birth. Surely I couldn’t just brush it all off as nonsense because it is fashionable in British society to just unthinkingly dismiss it all as fantasy.

That is the question that Jesus puts to his disciples in this bible passage today.Who do you think I am?’

How would you respond to the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ Perhaps it will depend on who is asking! What if it was a young child visiting a church for the first time? Or a person from another faith? Someone who has declared they are an atheist? An alien from Mars?

Jesus has taken the disciples a long way north to the city of Caesarea Philippi.

There was a spring there that was/is the source of the River Jordan. The Ancient Greeks worshipped their god Pan there. The nearby road was used by conquering armies. King Herod the Great built a temple there and then his son, King Philip, built this city. To keep in with the ruling Roman emperor, Augustus, Philip called it Caesarea, but it became customary to give it his name too – so it became Caesarea Philippi. The Roman cult of the emperor, which gave the emperor divine status, meant that a place named Caesarea took on a kind of religious status.

For Jews, the newly renamed city of Caesarea Philippi is a blasphemous, idolatrous horror, a headquarters of the foreign rulers and a symbol of oppression. There, in temple and inscription, Caesar is worshipped as ‘Saviour’, ‘Son of God’. There, despite all the evidence to the contrary, Peter gets it right (for once!). Seeing beyond the might of empire, and that of Babylon implied by the reference to the figure of the ‘Son of Man’ well known from the Book of Daniel, it is this unarmed figure who will be given ‘everlasting dominion’

And just outside this place, this city, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, in effect, ‘What are people saying about me?’

Jesus went there to ask pointedly political and religious questions about his identity. First named in a list of those the crowds thought Jesus might be is John the Baptist, executed by Philip’s brother. But the others – Elijah and Jeremiah – were political and religious troublemakers in their own time.

Perhaps it is significant that they do not try to fit Jesus into the Caesarea story: they don’t expect him to embark on a campaign to get rid of the hated Romans. Rather, they try to fit him into their own Jewish faith story.

But then Jesus makes the question personal. Not what do others think about me – but what do you think about me. Who do you say I am? Peter makes another leap: ’You are the Messiah, Son of God.’ It is a personal faith confession.

Building on this, Jesus begins to reveal the story that will unfold from here on. But it will take a lot of thinking about. There will be a lot to learn, and a lot to experience. Peter’s claim is a big one, a leap of faith. Will it work out? In all that is to come, will they be able to continue trusting? We will follow up what happens next week.

In this charged atmosphere, Jesus asks the twelve who they think he is. Peter shoots back, you are. In the shadow of the walls of the seat of government, where there was a king, this was dangerous talk to declare that Jesus rather than Caesar was the Son of the living God. The authorities didn’t like people claiming to be the Messiah – because it usually meant opposition to their rule. They usually crucified Messiahs and of course eventually would this one, called Jesus. But the Bible declares that God vindicated this Messiah by the resurrection. That’s why we are still worshipping and following this Messiah two thousand years later. And like the voice at his baptism and on the mount of transfiguration, Jesus confirms that Peter has spoken God’s view on the matter.

This is probably where Jesus gives Simon the nickname ‘Rocky’? It is possible. More importantly, is it Peter or his confession that is the rock on which Jesus will build his Church? Surely the latter (but I am a Protestant not a Catholic!): The Church is founded on the simple confession of faith that Jesus is Lord. But this is not just a religious matter; it is a political one. Caesar was ‘Lord’, and in his empire there could be only one Lord. So, if Peter was saying that Jesus is Lord, then he is also saying that Caesar is not.

Empires today, like that of Rome, demand our allegiance, and indeed may require our worship in some way. And besides nations there are giant multinational businesses, media organizations and the like. So, for empires, it isn’t just Russia or China or the USA – think also in terms of Facebook, Apple, Amazon, broadcasting companies... On a day-to-day level, who do you give allegiance and offer worship to?

More startlingly, Jesus says that not only will he build his Church on this confession, but that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Is this about breaking in or breaking out? Again, surely the latter. This confession means that this little band will break out of Caesar’s empire and take countless thousands with them. But not only will God’s people be set free by their confession of allegiance to king Jesus, they will also hold the keys to God’s kingdom. This administrative image indicates that the disciples will organize life in their movement to ensure that everyone enjoys the liberating benefits of the confession.

We can get too hung up on ‘whatever you bind on earth…’. We are all capable of binding ourselves quite adequately by our own sins without any help. What is needed is loosing – or forgiving (which comes up in Matthew 18, the reading in two weeks’ time), and surely Peter is one who acknowledges he has much that needs forgiveness. Indeed, rather than ‘the Rock’, Peter may appear to be ‘rocky’ – like the stony ground on which grain is sown – springing up quickly and then falling when things get tough because he isn’t firmly rooted enough. If you confess Jesus is Lord – how can you make sure your faith will last, prevail through the challenges of life and the test ahead?

And then Jesus tells them to keep this all under wraps! The time will come for shouting it from the rooftops – but not yet. Now we can and should shout it from the rooftops: Jesus is risen and is Lord!

Maybe you’re not too sure? Maybe you want to check out the claims of Jesus for yourself. That would be a good thing, so long as it’s not an excuse to procrastinate – delay making a decision. Alpha Course are a good way to explore the Christian claims. Our synod is going to be holding one online. If you are interested, please contact me. There are also many books you could read – I could recommend many.

Who do you say Jesus is? Are you willing to encounter the one who said he was the Way the Truth and the Life – the son of the Living God – our Messiah – Our Saviour?

Now, when Jesus said *‘***I am the truth’**, the Hebrew understanding of ‘truth’ was really not just intellectual truth, head knowledge, but heart knowledge. In other words, truth as experienced. What’s the difference between intellectual and heart knowledge?

I’ve been married to my wife Debbie for 26 years. But supposing before we were married, before I’d even met her, I went into a bookshop and there was a book in there with the title *Debbie– the amazing woman!* And I picked that up and I thought, ‘Oh, that looks really interesting!’ Chapter One: Her Extraordinary Intelligence. Chapter Two: Her Sparkling Personality. Chapter Three: Her Potential to be a Long-Suffering Wife. Chapter Four: Her Cordon Bleu Cooking Skills. Chapter Five: Her Sporting Ability – quite a short chapter! But not as short as if it was about *my* sporting ability, I hasten to add!

If I read that book and said, ‘Wow, she sounds an amazing woman,’ that’s head knowledge. Now I can tell you she’s an amazing woman – that’s experience.

When Jesus said, *‘I am the truth’*, he was talking about an experience of truth: that we could have a relationship with him and experience that Jesus – not just that there’s evidence for the resurrection, but we can actually experience a relationship with the risen Jesus Christ.

**Shall we pray?**

Lord, you asked who people thought you were.
You got all kinds of answers.
Only you had the right answer.
Help us, Lord, always to trust you
to give us the right answers to our questions.
Help us always to remember
that you are the Son of the living God !

We pray for those who don’t yet know you as their Lord and Saviour. We pray you will help them in that search, reveal yourself to them by your Spirit.

Maybe you want to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. Maybe you’ve never responded to Jesus request: Who do you say I am and now you want to confess Jesus as your Lord and Saviour: then pray with me:

Jesus I accept you as my lord and Saviour. Forgive me for what I’ve done wrong. Fill me with your Spirit. Grant me your salvation and renewing life. Help me trust in you and follow you now. Thankyou Jesus.

If you’ve prayed that prayer talk with another Christian or me about it.

**Prayers of intercession**

Response:
We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.
**Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.**
**Your will be done, O Lord.**

We pray for people who struggle with their faith:
through self-doubt,
through difficult circumstances,
through bad things happening,
through being led astray,
by wanting fame and fortune.

We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.
**Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.**
**Your will be done, O Lord.**

We pray for people who feel in the dark,
locked in a situation where they can find no answer,
that they might come to understand
that you are the key to everything they need.

We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.
**Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.**
**Your will be done, O Lord.**

We pray for ourselves:
when we are in difficult situations,
when we try to unlock doors that aren’t ours to unlock,
when we don’t focus on the kingdom,
when we don’t share our story.

We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.
**Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.**
**Your will be done, O Lord.**



**An active way into prayer**

The idea of being someone’s rock is very familiar today. Give everybody a rock-shaped piece of card with the word Jesus on one side. Invite people to write on the reverse side the name of the person they most consider to be their rock, and perhaps the reason why, and then to spend a few moments quietly praying
for that person.



**HYMN: Jesus calls us o’er the tumult**



**A sending out prayer**

Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah. We go out now, hearts so full of amazement and joy, that we can’t help but share the good news. Go with us, good Lord, and help us to tell everyone who will listen. **Amen.**

