

## Sermon on Matthew 16.13-20 for Sunday the 23rd August 2020

Following a Sunday service, a woman walked out of her church and bumped into a thin, sort of lost-looking man standing outside the door, looking up at the cross on top of the church steeple.

She excused herself and started to walk away, but the man called her back.

“Tell me,” he said, pointing through the front doors into the church she had belonged to most of her life, “what is it that you believe in there?”

She started to answer him and then realised that she did not *know* the answer, or did not know how to put it into words and as she stood there trying to compose something the man said, “Never mind, I’m sorry if I bothered you,” and walked away.

He *did* bother her, and her story bothered me as I tried to decide what I would have answered in her place.

Why do I go to church?

And know the answer is not because I’m the vicar!!

What *is* it that we believe in there or here?

The Nicene creed?

That’s not really the answer you want to recite to an inquirer, even if you think they will stick around until you’ve finished!

That Jesus is Lord? Sure, but what does that mean to the average man or woman we meet?

That in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the world is in God’s good hands?

Says who? So what?

What is it that we believe?

Those first disciples of Jesus had travelled and lived with Jesus day in day out for over 2 nearly 3 years. You'd think that if anyone would have a handle on who this Jesus was, they would.

But this enigmatic leader they'd followed along the highways and byways around Judea and now into the region of Caesarea Philippi, still had them guessing.

Despite seeing first hand miracle after miracle, hearing unbelievable teaching they were still grappling in the dark to find the right answers.

When Jesus asked them the question 'Who do you think I am?' they resorted to feeding back what they had heard from other people... "John the Baptist, possibly Elijah or even Jeremiah!!"

"No, no that's not what I asked you!" you can hear Jesus saying... "Who do **YOU** say I am?"

If I asked you to step into this scene and be one of the disciples, how would you have replied.

Remember you don't have the gift of hindsight. Only on what you have seen and experienced so far!

And maybe that's the key.

We can only respond to this question from where we stand now. What we have experienced in our own lives.

Jesus doesn't want us to hold onto somebody else's understanding of who he was and is.

We are all called individually by name and we will individually have an understanding of who Jesus Christ the Son of the living God is for us.

When I was a child, my understanding of Jesus was what I encountered as a child through the images in my children's bible and what I heard in Sunday School.

Jesus was a friend, somebody to look up to, literally as well as metaphorically. Somebody who was kind and loved me. A kind of a superhero who could sort out anything.

The Jesus of my teenage years became for me more distant. He was always there in the wings but never really emerged onto the centre stage. My head was filled with the one liners taught in Sunday School, which if I am honest didn't mean much to me or make much sense.

I can remember watching Jesus of Nazareth on TV and falling in love with Robert Powell's amazing blue eyes. And despite knowing the story, always bursting into tears when he was crucified and getting really angry with those oh so nasty Romans and Pharisees.

I suppose Jesus was becoming less the Son of the Living God and more a historical character who did some amazing things way back when.

Our images and understanding of Jesus, who he was and is, will change as we move through the various stages of life. As we leave childhood behind and encounter the harsh realities of adulthood we grapple with those images and stories we have been told over the years and some of them we will discard whilst others we will reshape.

We will encounter new experiences of who God is and engage with new teachings that will reveal aspects of God and Jesus we had never heard of before.

For me now, the christian life is less about having the right beliefs about God or the bible or believing in the Christian tradition but about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the living Christ or the Spirit and being transformed by that experience.

I suppose my own journey has led me into a relationship that involved a journey of transformation.

That journey, my journey and also your journeys, just like those first disciples will reveal to each of us different aspects of this living God as and when we are open to a new understanding.

Just like Peter who today declares Jesus Messiah yet will shortly deny even knowing Jesus.

I don't think even Peter fully realised who Jesus was, certainly before the resurrection and I would say that even post resurrection he continued to learn new things about the risen Jesus.

The story of Peter's last encounter with Jesus is told not by Matthew but by John.

It takes place on a beach, where the risen Lord has just cooked breakfast for his disciples.

As soon as the meal is over, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, not once but three times, "Do you love me?"

Three times Peter answers, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

And three times Jesus replies, "Feed my sheep" which leads you to think that maybe the final answer Jesus seeks from those who love him is not an answer that is spoken so much as one that is lived, that the real truth about who he is for each one of us shows up not on our lips but in our lives.

So the next time you are asked "What is it you believe in?" don't think that you need to recite from memory the stock answers that you have heard other people reel out...

Be yourself, be honest, may be say that that you are still exploring who this Jesus is yourself but maybe you can share you experience so far of your own journey.

Give it a try, you may surprise yourself and say something that is inspired.

The important thing is to try...

not only to say what we are trying to understand through words but also to live it as well.

Whether we give the right answers or the wrong answers we are following in the footsteps of those first stumbling disciples.

All trying to make sense, ourselves, of who this person Jesus was and is.

Amen.