

Sunday Sermon - 23.08.20

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon

Revelation is always a key moment in life. In fiction it often comes at a climax of a piece, although it is rarely as simple as that in real life. The Gospels record that Jesus spent the first part of his ministry actually shielding who he really was from those around and about. If you recall, when he cast out demons he would often forbid them to speak since they knew who he was. However, he did need his followers to actually come to realize who he was for themselves. And so, almost immediately prior to his entry into Jerusalem, he took them aside for the final part of their education.

He chose Caesarea Philippi for this; a region about 25 miles north east of the Sea of Galilee. It was an area occupied, in the main, by non-Jewish people (gentiles) so there was the distinct possibility that he would have some time of quiet with The Twelve; no doubt so that he could check that they were ready, not only for what was about to happen in Jerusalem, but also for the work that they were about to undertake themselves.

Remember, this was a crucial point. Jesus knew that they were about to head off into the great unknown. His time was short; his days in the flesh were numbered. The dilemma he faced was simple, was there anyone who understood him? Was there anyone who had actually recognised him for who and what he was? Were there any people left who, when he had left this earthly life, would carry on his work and labour to bring the kingdom of God to the rest of humanity? This was of paramount importance since, had it not happened, the Christian faith itself would not have survived. If no-one even glimpsed the truth, then everything he had done would have come to nothing.

All he needed, was for someone to realise the truth, and his work would be safe. And that is why Jesus decided to reveal himself by putting them to the test. He would not reveal himself by stating clearly who he was, but would lead them gently up to it. So he started by asking his friends who people thought he was.

“Some say you are John the Baptist. Others that you are Elijah or Jeremiah” Even these choices had significant meaning. John the Baptist had been seen by all to be a great man. By suggestion Jesus was Elijah implied that he was not only a prophet (and a great one at that as Elijah was considered to be the greatest of the prophets) but also as a forerunner of the Messiah, whereas Jeremiah was believed to have taken the ark of the covenant out of the temple and hidden it until the Messiah's return. So in this threefold identification the people were setting Jesus in a high place. If Jesus were any one of these three then the Kingdom would be very near indeed.

And then Jesus asks the \$64,000 question. “But who do you say I am?”

In our everyday lives we may be challenged as to our beliefs. In those instances it is easy to hide behind a “cloak of Christianity”. We can reply “Christians believe that...” or something similar. We can put ourselves into the third person, distancing ourselves from the point of the question. It's a way of saving face. A way of deflecting attention. We should instead reply “I believe that...” putting ourselves very firmly in the firing line. We move from the “Some say...” to the “I say...”. The choice is ours and ours alone – we should be proud of that choice.

That was the essence of the question Jesus asked. “Don't quote the party line.” “Don't tell me the safe answer.” “What is YOUR opinion?”

We can imagine the disciples being slightly stunned by the directness of the question as they all tried to express thoughts that they were probably too afraid to express. And THAT was THE moment of revelation when Peter uttered those words “You are the Christ”.

Then Jesus knew that his work was safe because there was at least one person who understood. Someone had recognised him as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. It is a very personal discovery that Peter made that day, and it is one that we also have to make.

Because Christianity is not knowing about Jesus. Christianity is knowing Jesus. In a similar way, you might know how a car works but that is not the same as driving a car. It's not enough to simply read about Jesus but to actually know him as someone who loves each one of us and who died for our sins.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus didn't ask only Peter. Or the twelve. He asks each one of us, “You. - what do you think of me?”