

St John's Beeston – 29.06.2025

GOSPEL: Matthew 16.13-19

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Alleluia...

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.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia...**

Matthew 16:13-19 "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Apart from being an abusive football chant – the question "Who are ya?" is at the heart of what I want to talk about this morning. Who are you?

When people were arrested after the riots in Stockport and elsewhere they were brought to court very swiftly. I was interested to note that a lot of them when faced with the charges of rioting, violence and criminal damage stood before the magistrate or judge with heads bowed and in their defence said : – that really wasn't who I am – it was completely out of character – I'm not like that really. That's not who I am?

So, who are you?

This morning I want to briefly touch on the question of identity. I am not going to wade into the current debate on identity politics, I don't have time to do it justice, and I don't think I know enough. But I do want us to think about who we are.

Think about the new pope, Leo 14th. Is he really Leo 14th or is he really Robert Prevost? Did changing his name change his identity? Or is there a public Pope Leo 14th and in private behind the Vatican doors, a more simple Robert?

In last weekend's Observer a counsellor and therapist described her job as helping people to be authentically who they are. That's OK if you know who you are or who you're supposed to be or who you want to be?

One person who has made that discovery and transition is the journalist Phillipa York. In an interview in the Times newspaper a couple of weeks ago she explained how she found herself

to be 95% happy with her life as a journalist in Scotland. However, when she was living as the professional cyclist Robert Millar she was barely 5% happy despite the fame and adulation that came being at the top of his sport.

She was never comfortable as Robert, she IS Pippa.

All of this has been in the front of my mind for a couple of weeks knowing that I was going to preach on this passage today and would be faced by the question is raised by Jesus: Who do people say I am?

I was talking to Laura about it last Sunday. She is going through the searching process of working out who she is. Is she a priest? Is that what God is calling her to be? And it seems to me Jesus too might be questioning his identity. Commentators often direct us to think about this question as a test for Simon, but why did Jesus ask the question? Was he bothered about what people thought about him? Was he uncertain about his future? Was he uncertain about whether or not he really was the Messiah, the Christ? Did he want confirmation of his mission? Did he just want to hear Simon say nice things about him or was he testing Simon's understanding? Lots of questions about identity.

In Mark's account of this conversation he takes it further. Not only does Jesus ask 'Who do people say I am?' but pushes Simon further and asks : 'But who do you say that I am?' And Jesus gets cross with Peter's answer. Having explained who he is and how he must live and die because of who he is, Peter says : This is all nonsense. This is not you. We're not going to let this happen.

Jesus had to be true to himself – to his true identity. He knew what his purpose was. He knew that he was sent by God to reveal God's love to the world. He knew that nothing could side track him. Nothing should stop him being who he truly was.

And then there is more. In this morning's Gospel Simon gets his identity challenged. Ha ha! Says Jesus. You thought you were Simon but actually you are Peter! I'm going to change your name. You thought you were running a fishing business but actually you are the foundation stone of this thing I've come to build called the church. I'm going to change your identity. So, who are you? Simon or Peter, fisherman or gatekeeper?

So, who are you?

Many of us are aware that we present ourselves to the world with different identities, am I the bold, confident preacher stood before you this morning holding forth on this dais, 20 cms above contradiction, or am I the rather nervous, uncertain man I was in the vestry, worried about the quality of his sermon, in the grip of impostor syndrome?

Often I will hear people say that if I knew what they were really like I wouldn't like them. How often do we do or say things in order to fit in, present ourselves in a way that we think people

would prefer, put on a brave face, pretend that everything is OK, try to be more informed, intelligent, up to date than we really are?

Who are you?

If I could arrange a church outing to London, I might take you to Westminster Abbey. Over the West Door are ten statues of 20th century Christian martyrs and among them is a German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a fervent opponent of the Nazi regime in Germany and for the last 18 months of his life he was held in Tegel prison and then executed in Flossenberg concentration camp on the 9th April 1945 by hanging.

Among his writings is a poem, written in prison, where he explores this question of identity. Unsurprisingly he entitles the poem : Who am I?

He thinks about who he truly is. He seems to have two personalities. One is the confident, self-possessed, calm and brave prisoner he is when out in the exercise yard, stepping out he says like a country squire.

The other is the powerless frightened and timid person he finds himself to be when in his cell.

The poem finishes:

They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

Who are you?

Everyone here this morning is a unique and special child of God – unconditionally loved by Him. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise or stop you from living as though you are. Be true to who you really are – your identity is in God's love for you.

The text of Bonhoeffer's poem is reproduced below:

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotism and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*,
New Greatly Enlarged Edition (New York: Touchstone, 1971), 347-348)