

2014-06-29 Sue Diggory

St Peter and St Paul

“Who do you say I am?”

What’s in a name – a name can tell us a lot about a person?

Today in the church we celebrate St Peter and St Paul, both giants of the Christian church and both men who had new names as they set out on their journey of faith with Jesus, men who knew how to answer the question Jesus poses to his disciples in our reading today *‘Who do you say I am?’*

And here at Holy Trinity we will also be celebrating another name today, or to be more accurate three names; Edward, John, and Joseph, as Edward Markham is baptised and his parents and God parents answer this same question as they promise on Edward’s behalf that he turns to Christ as Saviour, submits to Christ as Lord and comes to Christ the way, the truth and the life, because having only celebrated his first birthday yesterday Edward is still too little to answer for himself.

But what about Jesus, what name was he known by? There are of course many ways that he is referred to in the Bible but today we are going to focus on just one, one that is very familiar, the one that his first followers used.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus asks his disciples two questions; but before we look at answering these questions lets spend a few moments looking at the context of this passage. Jesus had been busy for some time; teaching and healing, and he now needed time and space away from the crowds.

As we look back in Mathew’s Gospel we read that *Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people; the man with leprosy, the centurions servant, the two demon possessed men, a paralytic, a dead girl and a sick woman, the blind and mute.*

These are just some of the 'headlines' that leap out from the pages of Matthew's Gospel. And of course there is also Jesus' teaching; the beatitudes; that wonderful code for life as well as his other miracles, the feeding of the 4,000 and the calming of the storm that wonderful example of his power over the whole of creation that caused the disciples to ask "*What kind of man is this? Even the winds and waves obey him!*" There was no doubt that Jesus was no ordinary man; no ordinary man could do the things he did, but who or what was he, was the question that people were beginning to ask.

And now he and the disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, away from the crowds, north of Galilee on the slopes of Mount Hermon, in a place that had a history of pagan worship; a sacred place of ancient Canaanite Ba'al worship that subsequently became a Greek shrine for Pan, the fertility god.

How fitting that this place that was known for the worship of gods should be the setting for the revelation of the true identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God and not a 'dead' god linked with past pagan worship.

Who do people say I am and who do you say I am these were the two questions Jesus posed to the disciples.

His initial question got four possible answers – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. All of these were people who had already died, all were people who would have had to have returned from the dead and this would have been in line with first century Jewish belief that famous giants from Israel's past would appear before the coming of the Messiah; that they would be part of God's preparing the way.

John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets – four possibilities on the lips of the crowds but now Jesus turns to the disciples; they have reported the gossip, the rumours that are circulating, but now the question becomes personal; who do you say I am?

And so we turn to Peter, the spokesman for the group who declares, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. I wonder how much Peter actually understood as he uttered those words.

You are the Christ, the Greek word *Christos* is the same as the Hebrew word *Messiah*, the anointed one, the one who would fulfil all Israel's hopes.

Historically only the kings of Israel were anointed, do you remember how Samuel was sent by God to anoint David, the one chosen as Israel's king. And here Peter is in effect saying to Jesus you are the one sent as Israel's true king, the one anointed by God, but I wonder how much he actually understood about Jesus' relationship to the God that he believed had sent him as Israel's long expected Messiah. I wonder how much if anything he understood about how Israel's hopes would in fact be fulfilled. We know Peter still had much to learn and of course so do we.

And having heard Peter's response Jesus makes his own declaration of who Peter is; 'petros' the rock, no longer simply Simon the Galilean fisherman, but the one who would be the foundation stone of Jesus' new community of restored people for God, a community that would grow in number and a community that over 2,000 years later is still growing and will add at least one new member to it today – Edward as he is baptised and becomes a full member of Christ's church.

Today Edward begins his formal journey as a member of the church and over the months and years that lie ahead, with the support of his family and God parents I pray that he will grow in his faith and become an active member of the church for himself. We don't know what he will be called to do but it is likely that there will be ups and downs as he journeys on for Jesus.

On the day we heard about in our reading it was very much an 'up' day for Peter but we know that there would be 'down' days as well, there would be a time when Peter would deny even knowing who Jesus was but that there would also be the 'up' day when the resurrected Jesus reinstated him and told him to 'feed my sheep' which he did faithfully until his own martyr's death.

And as I said earlier today we also celebrate another saint, another giant who gave his life for Christ; Paul the church planter and letter writer; the one who took the good news of Jesus to the gentiles in what we know today as Turkey and Greece until his own death in Rome, but he is the one the one whose faith journey began dramatically when he encountered Christ on the Damascus Rd and he changed from being Saul the persecutor to Paul the saintly apostle.

Two men who gave their lives because they were prepared to answer confidently and publically 'you are the Christ' to the question that Jesus poses to each one of us 'Who do you say I am?'

So I wonder how confidently can we answer or explain to others who this person named Christ really is and what he really means to us. Is he:

A great and good man – many will agree with that

A prophet – some other faiths will even agree with that

A healer – well perhaps we're getting into trickier things here,

The Saviour, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ – now we are into territory that many find impossible to agree with and perhaps even for us here are questions that we find hard to answer, and that's where faith comes in and where those of us who may have been on the Christian journey for some time, or those of us like Edward who are taking some first faltering steps can take comfort that even giants of the faith like Peter had their down days, and that Paul spent the first part of his life actively trying to rid the world of those like us who seek however tentatively to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Amen