



Revd Ro's Reflection on 12th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 16

Year A

Romans 12.1-8

Matthew 16.13-20

The gospel readings from Matthew in recent weeks have dealt with Jesus' healing and teaching ministry around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has fed the five thousand and, just prior to today's passage, at Matthew 15.32, we have the feeding of the four thousand. Jesus' ministry is not confined to the area around the lake. The story of the Canaanite woman happens in the region of Tyre and Sidon. They are towns on the Mediterranean coast. In today's reading we are told that Jesus has journeyed to the district of Caesarea Philippi.

I didn't know very much about Caesarea Philippi so I looked it up. Caesarea Philippi stood some twenty five miles to the north east of the Sea of Galilee. It was the centre of the worship of different Gods, Syrian and Greek. The God Pan gave the town its former name Panias. There were temples to those Gods all around. Not only that, but it was here that Herod the Great had built a huge temple to Caesar as a god. It was his son Philip who added to this temple and changed the name to Caesarea adding his own name Philippi. I mention all of this because it shows how this area was soaked in different religions. It was important in Judaism too because by this temple was a cave which was the source waters of the River Jordan.

It is very significant therefore that it's in this place, a melting pot of so many religions, that Jesus chose to ask that key question of his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

It has been asserted in the early days of the church, around 85 AD that Mark was, 'The interpreter of Peter and set down all that he could remember of what Jesus had said and done.' Mark's gospel was the earliest and Matthew and Luke rely heavily on it for their source material.

Well if that is true and Mark is 'the interpreter of Peter', Peter certainly has been honest and has told it like it was, warts and all. There is no attempt on the part of the gospel writers to hide Peter's impetuosity or any of his failings. He always strikes me as a totally honest person who goes where

angels fear to tread. That is part of his attraction. There is no subterfuge in Peter's personality. He is a great encouragement to us. Peter is no plaster saint; he is a real human who gets things wrong as we all do. But there is one key thing about Peter, his love of Jesus and his total faith in him never wavers even when he betrays him through fear: that is why Peter is such a great inspiration. I remember watching two programmes called 'In the footsteps of St. Peter,' some time ago; I watched them again recently. They were narrated by David Suchet. David came from Jewish ancestors but he became a Christian after reading a New Testament left in the draw of a hotel room. The question Jesus has just asked of his disciples was so important for him when he became a Christian. When the programme deals with this gospel episode, David stood in the area of the ancient city and analysed the question and Peter's answer.

In the programme he comments on these words. Jesus says Peter is the rock man, *petra* or *petros* is Greek for rock, and he will be the foundation stone of his church. It has given Peter huge stature throughout the history of the Christian church. But David Suchet also points out an additional meaning, 'For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.' That indicates Peter's supreme faith, and it is on faith as strong as Peter's that the Christian church will depend. In other words, faith is the foundation stone of the Christian church.

The disciples answer Jesus' question,

'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

The Jewish people are still looking back. They do not recognise Jesus as someone new who brings a new way, in fact as the anointed one.

Here the disciple grope for answers but it is Peter whose supreme faith joined to his love of Jesus and his insight, speaks from his heart. 'You are the Messiah, Son of the living God.' (Matthew 16.16) Does his exclamation of faith make this place the birthplace of the new religion, Christianity? It is a wonderful moment of recognition and affirmation. So many times Jesus has said to his disciples, 'Do you still not understand?' But Peter has grasped the wonderful truth now. Jesus turns to him and his words are very significant.

¹⁷'...Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'

I have said before that Jesus' authority is directly of God. Now Jesus gives Peter authority and a huge responsibility falls onto the shoulders of this Galilean fisherman. Yes he will falter, but ultimately he will witness and die for his Lord. He will be recognised worldwide as the founding father.

This is one of my favourite gospel readings. Jesus is actually preparing the disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them, when they will have to walk alone, but in his strength. Here he makes it quite clear to them that it is Peter who will be their leader.

The spreading of the gospel will depend upon the disciples and those who have accepted Jesus' words and the new way. Those people who have the faith and courage to proclaim, as Peter did, and indeed as we do, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

The disciples and the first followers of Jesus were the founding fathers and mothers of the infant church. Here in the Romans reading Paul gives us his view of what the church must be like. He is addressing the early Christians, but his words should be the pattern for Christians of any age. He begins by looking at individual behaviour. We have seen how Paul has explained that the Holy Spirit occupies each one of us, that we are all children of God and heirs with Christ. So our bodies have become 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' indwelling within us. It is an awesome truth. The corollary

of this, says Paul, is that Christians must behave accordingly. If you accept Jesus as God, then you have to walk in his way, a very new way. Lives must be transformed to live the Christ life. Jesus has left us the example, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Behaviour must conform to that standard. Paul uses the word 'transformed,' at verse two. It is not acceptable to live in the old way, according to the world's standards. Jesus has turned the old values and ways upside down. I have used the word 'us', as Paul's words are as relevant to us now as those early Christians. God's standards are unchanging. It is not acceptable just to pay lip service to God you must live according to Christ's teaching. How do we do this? Paul gives the answer,

^{12.2} 'but be transformed by the renewing of your minds that you may discern what is the will of God.' If we accept Jesus wholeheartedly then our whole outlook should be transformed and conformed to his way not the old values. So we can decide for ourselves according to his values, in other words let the words 'what would Jesus do,' be our guide always.

We remember Jesus' words to Peter, 'on this rock I will build my church' as we read Paul's vision of what church must be. This is addressed to those first Christians but it echoes down the ages.

Paul gives a salutary piece of advice,

³ 'I say to everyone among you, not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.' He knows that the root of so much trouble is self-aggrandisement. Jesus warns against this after James and John want to have high places in the kingdom.

²⁵ '...You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,' (Matthew 20).

This passage from Philippians 2.6, is believed to have been one of the first hymns of the early church and it emphasises Jesus' humility. He is the servant king,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.'

Paul begins these famous verses by saying this must be your pattern,

^{2.1} 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' (Philippians 2)

There is no room for 'selfish ambition or conceit' status or lording it over others or thinking ourselves better than anyone else. We think of Shakespeare's words, 'I charge thee Cromwell fling away ambition, by that sin fell the angels.' Ambition is a besetting sin. If the love of money is the root of all evil, the love of power is not far behind it. Think of the trouble that causes throughout the world. Jesus' message is that we are all equal because we are all children of God.

Paul uses the image of the church as a body with one head, Jesus. It is a recurring image as here in Colossians 1:18

¹⁸ 'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.'

The most famous passage which perfectly explains the church using the image of the body is 1 Corinthians 12.12+

¹² 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.'

Paul goes on to make the point clear in that passage

²⁰ 'As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.'

²⁵ 'That there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.'

It is not meant to be an idealistic Utopia but a working model for every generation, a living breathing reality founded upon Jesus' teaching. That does not mean that there is no structure, no one in charge of an organisation, that would be chaotic. It means that each person has an equally valuable part to play and must be respected. No one is more important than another in the eyes of God. This is what Paul outlines at the end of the passage when he talks about roles within the church. As Paul says in verse five,

⁵ 'so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.'

Romans 12

We reiterate this in our communion service, 'though we are many we are one body because we all share in the one bread.'

Paul goes on to say that we all have God given gifts and talents and that these are of great value in the church, but none is superior to the other. It is interesting that he says, at the end of the passage, 'the compassionate in cheerfulness.'

This is of vast significance; we are all called on to show compassion or pastoral care. Not just within the church community but to everyone.

We must be inclusive and care about others. Really that is Jesus' message in a nutshell. I think that is what prompted the phrase; 'Christianity exists for the benefit of the non-members.'

*'From heaven you came helpless babe, entered our world your glory veiled;
not to be served but to serve, and give your life that we may live.*

'This is our God the servant King; he calls us now to follow him.' G. Kendrick

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