

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 23rd August 2020

It was a beautiful summer Sunday morning. An elderly lady walked up the pathway to the little country kirk in the Highlands. A friendly Elder greeted her at the door and helped her up the few steps into the vestibule.

“Good morning,” he said, “where would you like to sit?”

“The front pew please,” she answered.

“O,” he replied, “you really don’t want to do that. Our Minister is terribly dull and boring.”

“Do you happen to know who I am?” asked the lady.

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t!” said the Elder.

“I am the Minister’s mother,” she replied indignantly.

“Do you know who I am?” the Elder asked.

“No,” she answered.

“Good!” he replied.

What’s in a name?

If I were to ask you what you thought about Boris Johnson, Sir Keir Starmer or Nicola Sturgeon, my guess is that 95% of you would have an opinion. The vast majority of you would have something to say about these political figures who feature so prominently in our News Bulletins every day.

I would even venture to say that some of your opinions would be quite impassioned!

A former Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, was once visiting a Nursing Home in Cambridge. She enjoyed a brief exchange with a few of the residents, chatting to them here and there as they sat in their armchairs in the lounge.

One particular elderly lady seemed to be very lucid, so the Prime Minister risked asking, “Do you know who I am?”

“No,” replied the old lady, “but if you ask that nice nurse over there, I am sure that she will tell you!”

Of course, even on a bad day, Margaret Thatcher, was not really in need of that information, any more than Jesus is when He and His disciples reach the region of Caesarea Philippi.

But that doesn't mean that the question is unimportant.

Quite the opposite.

Jesus asks them "Who do you say that I am?"

A question for then, a question for now.

Answering it is not as easy as it sounds.

So many people try to put Jesus into a box that fits their needs; their prejudices; their understanding.

The disciples that day gave Jesus the word that was on the street.

"Well, some people are saying that You are Elijah." A pretty good call; a legitimate prophet; precursor to the Messiah.

"Others call you John the Baptist, returned from death." Again, an ok choice, the prophet proclaiming the coming Kingdom, preaching a baptism of repentance.

Now Jesus was not hostile to any of these descriptions. Those answers showed that the crowds, unlike the religious leaders of the day, were friendly to Jesus. They were interested in Him, curious about Him. There was something about this Carpenter from Nazareth that intrigued them. They continued to flock to Him wherever He went; they turned up in their hundreds to hear Him preach; they hoped to see Him perform a miracle.

They knew that there was something different, something special, something unique about this Man.

And they speculated about Him.

Two thousand years later, countless people still do – they see Him as a great teacher; a good and wise man, one of the great religious figures of antiquity, up there with Moses, and Plato and Confucius and the rest.

Others regard Him as just a name, a religious fanatic, a megalomaniac, who lived long ago and far away and certainly has nothing to say to the sophisticated world of the 21st century. They are very bewildered by the people who get up on a wet and dreich Sunday morning, the people, like you and me, who cling to an antiquated superstition, the folk who label themselves "Christian."

But Jesus was not really interested in what others thought about Him.

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

And I readily imagine that there was an awkward silence before Simon broke that silence and blurted out,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." You are the Christ, the one for Whom we have been waiting, the one Who will deliver us, the One who reveals God's identity to us.

Bingo!

Simon had dare to mention the M word! Messiah, with all its connotations of the time – the One who would be like the great King David and free the land from the oppressing Romans, the One who would raise His standard and gather an army and throw out the occupying force.

That is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, that Simon had in mind.

And Jesus goes on to tell them that this is NOT the Messiah that He was – He was not the warrior King on a stallion, slaying the Romans; His rule would be by peace and gentleness and love.

Simon and the others had to understand the true meaning of Kingship, of service, of forgiveness.

And it was then that Jesus gave Simon a new name, a new identity. From now on he would be Peter, the Rock.

In the Biblical story a name often defines a person's identity. So when names are changed, so are identities. In the Old Testament God changed the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah to indicate their new status as the founders of God's people.

So when Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, Peter took on a new identity in Christ.

When a new Pope is elected, often he will change his name. When Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was elected to be the new Bishop of Rome in 2013, he chose the name of Francis, in honour of St Francis of Assisi, what has proved to be a very fitting choice as in the past seven years, he has tried to emulate the humble and evangelical ministry of St Francis.

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus.

And only you can answer that question. In our baptism, we took on a new identity in Christ.

And others will look at us and listen to us and observe us, and they will know by our words, our actions, our deeds exactly Whom we believe Jesus to be.

As I once heard my own Minister, the Revd Dr Arthur Fawcett, say from the pulpit long ago, "If He is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all."

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister