



Sunday Reflection

12th Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 23 August 2020

Pentecost 12

while all Church worship in the buildings is suspended

On this 12th Sunday after Pentecost, and the eleventh Sunday after Trinity,
as we come together in worship, we pray that we may seek
the Father in Spirit and in truth.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Matthew 16.13

An Illustration to set the scene

George knew he had bucked the trend. Working patterns had changed out of all recognition from his early days of work; people had to think in terms of multiple careers and there was no longer any such thing as a "job for life". Despite shifting work patterns, however, George had somehow managed to stay in the same job all his working life. He had been taken on as an inexperienced teenager and gradually worked his way up the ladder of promotion. Now he had reached retirement age, having worked contentedly with the same family firm of bakers for decades. But now that the warm glow of the leaving party had faded, and he had given pride of place on the mantelpiece to the beautiful carriage clock they had presented to him, he felt unexpectedly desolate. Who was he, without his much-loved work to define him? And what on earth was he going to do with the rest of his life?

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

Jesus begins today's Gospel reading by asking the disciples a curious question – curious, because he must already have been aware of what the crowds of his followers believed about him. What the disciples say about people's views of Jesus' identity seems somewhat predictable: he preaches about God, so he puts them in mind of John the Baptist; he performs miracles, like Elijah; so he is clearly a prophet, like Jeremiah. But there is a point to Jesus' question; he is using it as a stepping stone to one which is much closer to home: "Who do you say that I am?" It is Simon Peter who gives the definitive answer, reaching through the superficial clues of identity to the far deeper divine essence beneath: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

This flash of perception earns him both an affirmation and a promise from Jesus, who renames him Peter, "the rock", "and on this rock I will build my Church". Despite this high point for Peter, the verses which immediately follow this passage make it clear that he was still capable of all-too-human mistakes and misunderstanding, although these failings will prove no obstacle to his future use for God's sovereign purposes.

Whatever Jesus' intention, the conclusion is clear: it is belief, rather than background or behaviour, that opens the possibility of God's work of healing and salvation within us.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

There is a powerful challenge for us here. The first part picks up the dilemma faced by George in our opening illustration. We so often think of and identify ourselves – and others – by what we do, rather than who we truly are in our deepest being. I may be a teacher, or a mother, a police officer, an astronaut, a gymnast or a shop assistant – but who am I, when, like George, I can no longer define myself in these terms? The labels we acquire as we

progress through the earlier decades of life are necessary if families are to be raised and work – of all kinds – is to be done. But when those labels become outdated and no longer fit us in quite the way they once did, what then? Then comes the invitation to dig deeper.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus questioned his disciples then, and he questions us now. We are Jesus’ present-day disciples; we love him, trust him worship him and try to live after the pattern that he left us. But who, precisely, do we think Jesus is? A preacher and teacher? A miracle worker? A prophet? All those are characteristics that we can see and hear and, to some extent, understand. But Jesus isn’t satisfied by those answers and he pushes his disciples further. “Messiah,” says Peter, “Son of the living God”. Yes, says Jesus, but these are truths of a different magnitude.

How do we begin to grasp the deep realities of Jesus’ core identity? As Jesus says, flesh and blood can’t do it, but only his Father in heaven. Worn-out labels that have served us well up to this point in our lives may now leave us feeling empty and useless. Jesus’ response is to invite us on a journey of discovery and prayer that will lead us into the very heart of God, and to the true centre of our identity in him.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Matthew 16.13

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God’ spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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