

Sunday, August 27, 2023
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16 Year A)

Matthew 16.13-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/660831659100626>

(Sermon begins at about 20:30)

“On This Rock”

Over the last month or so, our lectionary readings have dealt quite a bit with issues of identity. The ongoing revelation of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah and as the Son of God, and of our own identity as members of the Body of Christ. Today’s Gospel reading is the end of several chapters in which Matthew specifically focuses on this issue of Jesus’ identity and how that was initially revealed in a variety of ways. Up until now, there has been little if any explicit statements about the relationship between Jesus’ identity and the individual and collective identities of his followers. This side of the Resurrection, we are able to infer that relationship between Jesus’ identity and that of his disciples—the relationship between Jesus’ identity and our own identity as members of the Body of Christ—because we know the full story. But in the chain of events as presented in Matthew’s Gospel, that process is ongoing, with today’s pericope finally making that connection explicit. More or less.

Jesus and the disciples have arrived in Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Okay, where did that come from? All of a sudden asking what people are saying about him. To be clear, “Son of Man” was a term that Jesus used to refer to himself, particularly in a messianic sense. But it was also a general term that referred to one who was anointed by God. A term that could be, and often was, applied to anyone viewed as being a messianic figure. Which actually explains why Jesus asked the question in the first place. What actually prompts the question is the physical place they currently are: Caesarea Philippi. A city where Herod the Great had erected a temple in honor of Emperor Augustus, who declared himself *Divi Filius*: “Son of the Divine.” With Son of Man and Son of God being synonymous, Jesus’ question to his disciples was a backhanded way of mocking this title as applied to Augustus. After all, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah, was to be a liberator of the people. Not an oppressor, as was Augustus. In effect, Jesus was saying, “Augustus thinks he is the Son of Man. But we all know that is poppycock.”

People thinking of Jesus as being the reincarnation or second coming of John the Baptist (who had just been executed, by the way) or any of the other ancient prophets seems a bit odd. Yet, all the possibilities mentioned were men who prophesied liberation of the people. The role that would be fulfilled by the Messiah. The people, while not quite ready to out-and-out state Jesus is the Messiah, are circling in on that conclusion. So then, Jesus asks his disciples—those who knew him better than anyone, those who had seen him in action, up close and personal—“But who do you say that I am?” And that’s when Peter makes the first statement by another as to Jesus’ true identity. The first public confession of faith in who Jesus is. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

This is significant. In more ways than one. Peter confessing belief that Jesus is Messiah is one thing. This was a time when would-be messiahs were around every corner. Anyone preaching a message of liberation could be in the running for the job. But confessing that he is the Son of the living God, that was huge. That was an understanding that exceeded mere listening to Jesus or observation of his actions. This understanding could only be due to Divine revelation: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” With that revelation out of the way, with that key piece of information now on the table, what to do with it?

As we will see in next week’s Gospel, a continuation of today’s, Jesus has a clear sense of what it means for him to be Messiah. Of what the long game will be. Of his own fate as Messiah. Of how this will all play out. And it is not at all what Peter thinks it means when he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Although, that will all be corrected and made clear in the fullness of time. All this means that Jesus needs to be looking at the long-term. At what comes after. Time to start thinking about how Jesus’ work will continue after he has fulfilled his destiny in Jerusalem.

Someone is going to need to take up Jesus’ mantle and lead this movement after he’s gone. Someone who will not replace Jesus, but someone who will be faithful in proclaiming the message of who Jesus is. Of proclaiming Jesus’ true identity. And in the process, to nurture and guide the development of those who live into their newly found identity as followers of Jesus. What better person to do that than the one who first recognized and confessed who Jesus truly is. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Really? Peter? Sure, he might have been the first one Jesus called to be his disciple. He might have been the one who first figured out who Jesus really is. He might have been the first one to publicly confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But look at who Peter really is. At what he is really like. He’s a simple fisherman. Minimal education at best. Impetuous as all get-out. Why, just a little while ago when the disciples were all in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus came walking toward them on the sea, Peter got out of the boat and tried to walk on water like Jesus. What was he thinking? That certainly did not end well. Well, until Jesus saved him. And this is who you are designating as the one to lead your people after you’re gone?

And looking ahead, which Jesus surely had some inkling of . . . In just a few minutes (well, in next week’s Gospel account), Peter seeks to prevent Jesus from fulfilling his destiny. Unable to accept the realities of what needs to happen. What kind of future leader is this who can’t deal with difficult situations? Then on the Mount of the Transfiguration, wanting to build three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Wanting to forget all about what needed to happen and just staying up there on that mountain navel-gazing. How can we have a leader who wants to ignore reality and run away from the truth? Then, during the Passion, his denial that he even knows Jesus. Not just once, but three times! How can we have a leader who is supposed to continue the message of Jesus when he is unwilling to even acknowledge knowing him?

This is who Jesus taps to lead the future church? The one who will be the foundation on which the future of the largest religious institution in history will be built? One who is so often

misunderstanding, impetuous, foolish, stubborn, short-sighted, fearful, cowardly, selfish, unreliable, looking out for his own skin? What is Jesus thinking?

But at the same time, Peter does have his moments. One who cares deeply for his Master and his fellow disciples, who is willing to step up and carry a burden he never asked for, who is open to possibilities, who is willing to change for the greater good. And who ultimately proves himself unwaveringly faithful to his Lord and willing to die for the sake of the Gospel. Living into the fullness of what it means to be a follower of the Risen Lord.

Exhibiting the less-flattering qualities of humanity, while also embodying the best humanity has to offer. Coming together to represent the fullness of who we are as human beings. Coming together to represent the totality of who we are as those lovingly created by God. Representing all those who will come together to form the Body of Christ in the world. Which makes him the perfect person to build Christ's church. Warts and all.

I guess Jesus knew what he was doing after all. Two thousand years later, we're still here. What started as a small rag-tag band of followers of an itinerant Jewish teacher who claimed to be the Son of Man—a small band of people who were able to see the truth of who he really was as the Messiah and the Son of the living God—has grown to be the largest religion in the history of our planet. Which has grown to be one of, if not the, most influential movements in the history of human civilization. Thanks to the dedication of an unlikely leader who does truly represent us all, whether we are willing to admit it or not.

Peter's example, the good, the bad, and the ugly, is an invitation to each of us in our own lives of faith. That no matter who we are, no matter what we have done or failed to do, each of us has something, each of us is someone, that Christ can use to further his purposes. That just as Peter was transformed through his experience of the Risen Lord, we too are transformed into just who he needs us to be at this time in the history of the Church.

What starts off as a question about the prevailing perception of Jesus' identity leads to the first public confession of who Jesus really is. Because of the Divine inspiration and revelation that goes into that understanding, the one who made that confession, Peter, is transformed. He is given a new identity as the one who will be the foundation on which the earthly manifestation of God's kingdom will be built and expanded. And all those who follow, all those who stand on that foundation—each and every one of us—are similarly given a new identity. As we live into that identity conferred through Baptism, as beloved children of God, as members of the Body of Christ, we too become part of the rock, the foundation, upon which the Church will continue to be built and grow and thrive as the visible and tangible manifestation of Christ's presence in the world.