

Pentecost 16 – “Peter’s Confession of Christ” – 21st August 2011

Reading: - Matthew 16: 13-20

Jesus asked the disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” said Peter. – vss 15/16

Introduction

Rick Warren has written: “Christians are like teabags. You don’t
know what is inside until you put them
in hot water!”

Fascinating to reflect on this analogy for ourselves.

Christianity is more than a philosophy of life. Rather, Christianity is a way of life. It will be interesting to see what the Census figures reveal in the forms that we have just filled out. The majority of Australians believe in God, yet church membership in the main line denominations is declining. Some observers say that we are ‘religious’ without being organizationally, participatory religious. Put simply, our society often believes but is wary of joining!

I’m not entirely sure what we do with this but it is a constant challenge.

Belief and belonging have traditionally gone hand-in-hand yet now there seems a divide occurring.

Not so for Peter, in whom we have seen a growing faith in some of the Gospel readings over the past few weeks.

Jesus asks the general question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The disciples answer with great religious leaders or prophets. Then Jesus asks the personal question, the one you can’t run away from. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

It is out of this question that we have Peter’s profession of faith.

Simon Peter answered, “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

What would we have answered? How would we have answered? I’m fascinated that we have only one answer recorded. What did the other disciples think? Did any of them also answer, but less convincingly, hence it is not recorded?

Story

I share with you a story I read as I prepared this sermon. I have altered it a little to fit our context.

‘A professor friend of mine was born into a Christian family and grew up in the church. When he went to university he questioned his faith and had discussions with friends that led him away from practicing his faith. He became in his words, “sort of a Christian, but one who actually didn’t practice Christianity, a believer

but not a doer.’ In his work sphere he had become an expert in East-West business relations. In the 1980’s he was at a conference on business in the Soviet Union and was chatting with an official from the Soviet bloc. She said to my friend, “I understand that you are a Christian. I am an atheist. Tell me, what difference does your belief in God make in the way you vote, the way you spend your money, the way you live your life?” My friend was somewhat stunned with this forthrightness in the conversation, but within it was also the challenge, personally, to look at his life and see where his faith had made a difference in his decision making. Here was the opportunity to witness to his faith and he was struggling. My friend said to me, “I realised that though I believed like a believer, I lived like an atheist.” It was a stunning moment of honest recognition for him that eventually led him back to a vibrant, living faith.

I repeat what Rick Warren said, “Christians are like teabags. You don’t know what’s inside until you put them in hot water.”

Middle

Did Jesus know that Peter would make his amazing profession of faith? I honestly don’t know, but Jesus’ response to it was equally amazing as he says to Peter: “..And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” vs 18

The Greek name for Peter is ‘petros’ which literally means ‘detached stone or rock’. The Greek for rock is ‘petra’ and literally means ‘bedrock’ that solid substrata stuff that is immovable. Obviously there is a ‘play on words’ in the Greek but the substance of it is that Peter, who is not always so solid in his faith, will be the foundation of the early church. Incredible that this ‘detached stone’ will become, with Christ, the cornerstone of the new faith community.

Also here the word ‘church’ is mentioned in one of only two places in the Gospels (the other is Matthew 18:17). So often we assume that the church is in the Gospels but really it grows out of Jesus’ ministry and here we have the formation of that community to come, mentioned by Jesus.

The other subtle aspect of this account is that Jesus initially asks “Who the disciples think he is?” and then when he receives Peter’s faith statement he then tells Peter “Who he is and what he’ll be.” Somehow, Jesus turns the entire conversation from self to Peter’s future in just a few sentences.

A further matter, which over the years has caused some division between Roman Catholics and Protestants is not only will Peter be the ‘rock’ of the early church he is also given ‘the keys to the Kingdom’, which is further explained as the ‘power to bind or loose’, rabbinic terminology for doctrinal and disciplinary authority. In spite of some interpreters trying to play down the role of Peter and to argue that it is Peter’s faith, not Peter himself, upon which the church is built, this passage clearly recognizes Peter’s leadership role among the disciples.

Relevance for today

1. We are reminded that our faith is more than pure assent to a code of conduct or following a good man's lifestyle. We are called to live out what we believe. That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God – our Lord and Saviour. This should influence our lifestyle, decision making and the way that we deal with people in a Christ-like manner.

2. This passage reminds us that our faith should make a difference and that if we really believe and follow the Christ, then our care of others, our spirituality, our social justice and personal lives will reflect our belief patterns.

3. That Jesus still challenges us today, reminding us that our faith is both corporate as a church, but also personal. We are asked the question by Jesus: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

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