

Pentecost 12 – 27 August 2017  
Rev Elizabeth Richardson

### **Sermon**

Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was. The disciples gave the names of various prophets from Israel's history. This gives us a real idea of how Jesus was seen by others in the country. He was clearly a very strong person who would speak up for issues of justice. He was no weak willed person who just wanted to be liked. Jesus was prepared to tell people in no uncertain terms where they were going wrong – just as those great prophets of earlier days had done. And he would not be popular with the authorities. Prophets telling the rulers where they were going wrong were bound to cause difficulties.

After that, Peter said that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. (16:16). Peter acted as spokesman for the group of disciples and it wasn't the first time that they had identified Jesus but on this occasion it makes it very clear that the followers of Jesus are separate from others in the country. And note what Jesus then responds. He doesn't say “Yes, you are right” or “thank you”. No, Jesus explains that Peter had not worked it out for himself but that God had revealed it to him.

Up to that point, Peter had been known by his birth name, Simon the son of Jonah, but now, Jesus gave him the name for rock or stone. In Aramaic it was Cephas, in Greek, petra and Jesus called him Petros. So from the Greek word we have the name Peter. Peter was not a normal given name at that time but has since become one. Parents weren't in the habit of naming their child “stone” or “rock”. That new name was to stand for the role Jesus had for Peter. Peter was to be the foundation of the church. Jesus would be the builder but the solid basis of the church would be Peter.

When we think of it, Jesus was taking a risk. Peter had his faults. Peter went on to deny knowing Jesus when the critical time came. But even so, Peter eventually did become a solid foundation of the new movement we now know as the Christian church. Jesus had faith that Peter would be up to the job. It wasn't the first time that God had taken risks with individuals. Our children's story this morning told the story of the rescue from death of baby Moses so that God was able to use him in his later years to lead the people out of slavery. And Moses was a man with major faults as well as great organizational abilities and, eventually, faith in God.

Now think about us. We learn from the gospels that it was Jesus and God who sought out the disciples. Jesus asked them to follow him – they didn't ask to go with him. And so, almost two thousand years later, God and Jesus continue to touch us and ask us to follow. When we say yes, and when we acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God then we can't just have nice warm feelings about it. Neither can we just join a church and come to worship services on Sundays. We have to change our lives and be constantly aware of the meaning of discipleship.

This is when it becomes demanding. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome spelt out just what it meant. In the first half of the letter, Paul had been talking about the faith. Then today's reading starts with a big "Therefore". He goes on to tell of the consequences for everyone in acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God.

We are told that we cannot be part of the culture of the secular world. Many people are fully part of the culture around them. They may call themselves Christian or say that they follow Christian moral teachings but are not truly living a Christian life.

For most people, wearing what those around are wearing, or going to the same places or holding the same basic ideas is necessary for keeping friends and maintaining a place in a valued group of friends. Having the latest piece of technology is vital. Holding similar values to those of your friends is important. We can all understand that. And we also know how hard it is to stand out from the crowd. To stand up and say you disagree with what people around you are saying.

How do we measure our place in society? Is it by academic achievements? Is it by climbing the ladder in our occupations? The house we live in? The schools we send our children to? Maybe you are retired and say that is all in the past – but what about travel? More and more older people are travelling regularly to other parts of the world and look pityingly at friends who don't. The travel itself is not the problem, it is the attitude to it that matters. The job is not the trouble, it is the attitude to it that matters.

Paul spells out how important it is to be fully engaged in the Christian community. That means that we acknowledge that we each have a role to play and there is no place for power struggles in the church. We need to live harmoniously together. Mind you, Paul had had to deal with quite a few power struggles already in the early church so he knew what he was talking about. In the Corinthian church the richer members had been making life difficult for the poorer ones. The church needs all our talents and our whole selves. When Paul said to present our bodies as a living sacrifice he meant our minds as well as our physical bodies. Rather than giving animal sacrifice as a means of worship, we are to devote our lives to serve God. That is a major form of our worship.

So, do you call Jesus the Son of God? If so, what difference does that make to your life? Does it make a difference to the way you vote in government elections? Does it make a difference to the way you spend your money?

Being a Christian is not just being a sensitive, thinking, caring person. Being a Christian turns our lives around. And we keep on working at it. Each time we make a decision about spending money we have to consider it as the use of our resources that God would want. Have the items we buy been produced

ethically? Each time we vote we need to consider the options in the light of Jesus' teaching. There is no 'set and forget' about being a Christian. There is no chance of thinking "I've accepted Jesus as my Lord and Saviour and now I can do what I like". That is certainly not what is meant.

Christians are in a relationship with Jesus and God. We are in relationship with other church members. We support each other. We work together to build the world that God sent Jesus to teach.

Bishop Tom Wright says in his book After You Believe, "We have to be able to think about what to do – what to do with our whole lives, and what to do in the sudden crisis that faces us this very minute. Being trained to think "Christianly" is the necessary antidote to what will otherwise happen: being, as Paul says, "squeezed into the shape dictated by the present age" (p151)

Wright goes on to say that in today's society, emotivism has taken over from clear rational thinking. (p156-8) Paul says we need to think with sober judgment and with the appropriate humility. But too often, letters to the editor or other public communications say "this is what I think and I know that lots of others think like me" as though that is all the proof that is necessary. Wright calls that sort of argument that is given without reasons, emotional blackmail. Jesus and Paul expected Christians to give their whole minds to understanding Jesus and his message.

Let each one of us leave the church today with today's readings on our minds. Do we acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and then are we offering our whole lives to God's service? Think on these things. Do not set and forget your faith.  
Amen.