

Wed 29 June 2016 St Peter's Mid Week Holy Communion

Matt 15: 13-19

Authority

There are many jokes about St Peter sitting at the gates of heaven, holding his bunch of keys. Here's one I like:

A preacher and a bus driver went to heaven. The bus driver was allocated a beautiful mansion with large rooms. The preacher however, was given only a one-room unit, so she went to St. Peter and said, "How come I've been given a very small place and that bus driver got a beautiful house? I've preached the Good News all my working life!" St. Peter replied, "It's a matter of results. When you preached, people fell asleep. When the bus driver drove his bus, people prayed."

I wonder what Jesus actually meant by giving Simon, now Peter, the keys to the Kingdom and why would he, the ultimate subverter of earthly authority, create such a role for him?

Bill Loader says that the keys were "*traditionally in the hands of the [scribes], the interpreters of the tradition*". The scribe wore a belt around his waist and on that belt hung keys, symbolic of his knowledge.

Matthew 23:13 accuses the scribes and Pharisees of using them to lock people out of the kingdom. But now a new community, under the leadership of Peter, will share the authority to interpret the scriptures, particularly those relating to the messiah.

There's nothing here to suggest a dynasty with power belonging exclusively to Peter and his successors. He and the others are to be the gathered community which must bring God's compassion and love into confrontation with the destructive powers of evil.

'*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*' asked Jesus, using a description he commonly gave to himself.

The disciples would've been listening to the crowds in the streets; the chatter around the wells; the gossip over the garden wall.

They all had something to report: "Some say you're John the Baptist, returned from the dead." "Some say Elijah."

"I've heard others say they thought you were Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

All these answers are, in some ways, correct! Jesus is a prophet in the spirit of John the Baptist, and in the spirit of Elijah, and in the spirit of Jeremiah, the suffering prophet.

But Jesus' question is not just a spiritual one; it is also about allegiance, and whether that allegiance should be to God, or to the power of the state.

It's no accident that this encounter takes place in Caesarea Philippi.

The city of Caesarea Philippi, situated in the foothills of Mount Lebanon, around 2000 feet above sea level, was originally an ancient holy place honouring the pagan god Pan.

Herod the Great's son Philip, a contemporary of Jesus, who ruled over Trachonitis and other provinces east of the Jordan, built his summer residence there after his father's death in 4 BCE., naming it in honour of Tiberius Caesar.

It was an important seat of power; both the ultimate political power of Rome, and the city of the local ruler.

Both these forces claimed political and religious power and Jesus would have been well aware of this.

This incident could be seen as a confrontation between Jesus and the power of the state. Under their very noses, Jesus makes his own claim to power.

Maybe he led his disciples to this place because he wanted them to recognise him in a setting very different from the familiar shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Perhaps he wanted them to understand him as Messiah of the whole world, not just of the Jews.

But Jesus isn't only interested in knowing what people are saying about him, he has a far more difficult question for the disciples:

"Who do you say that I am?" he asks. What will *your* allegiance be?

Only Peter is brave enough to answer with his heartfelt affirmation of loyalty and commitment:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

In other words: *"Whoever you are to everyone else, whatever anyone else may say about you, to me you are the chosen One of God, the Messiah, the Lord!"*

Peter's response is not only a personal spiritual insight, it's also a statement of allegiance against other power systems, and other claims to power.

But it's not the kind of power that leads to earthly glory.

In the verses following today's gospel we read: ...

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it....

Today, Jesus still asks us: *'Who do you say I am?'*

Each of us will answer that question differently, depending on our beliefs, and our life experience.

There are plenty of answers to that question in the world around us, mostly along the lines that he was a great moral teacher, or a deluded madman, or at the centre of a secret conspiracy.

But if we're really serious about calling ourselves Christians, our own answer to his question will be just the same as Peter's:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The earliest affirmation of faith for the Christian movement was the three simple words: *Jesus is Lord.*

In other words Jesus is the one with authority over my values, my relationships, my time, my money, my talents.

Jesus never imposes this affirmation on us, and never directly claims it for himself. Rather, our affirmation of the Lordship of Christ is our personal response to our experience of his life, death, and resurrection.

When the Living Christ meets us along the pathways of our lives and asks, *"Who do you say I am?"* the real challenge is what we do next:

A missionary in China once visited a group of people in a town far into the interior. He expected to be the first one to tell them the story of Jesus, but when he had talked a while, someone said:

"Oh, yes, we knew Him; He used to live here."

The missionary was somewhat surprised, and said: *"Oh, no, He lived centuries ago in another land."* But the locals still insisted that they'd seen Jesus, saying: *"He lived here in the village, and we knew Him."*

Then the crowd led the missionary to the village cemetery and showed him the grave of a medical missionary who had lived, served, healed, and died in that community.

Years from now, when we're long gone, and someone else is hearing the story of Jesus for the first time, could that person make this same mistake about us?

"Oh, yes, we knew them. They used to live here." Amen.

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