

“You Are The Christ” (St. Matthew 16: 13 ó 20) [North Side Christian Endeavour 87th Anniversary 31.8.2014]

Tonight's Gospel text marks a critical point in our Christian history ó regarded in a way as the *start of Christ's Church*. Peter's discernment, his epiphany, is a pivotal moment for us, as he told Jesus, "You are the Christ". It took particular courage for Peter, in front of his "Rabbi" and his other Jewish companions, to add his critical belief, which Matthew quotes here as, "You are the Christ, *the Son of the Living God*". Peter, in uttering his revelation, went a giant step further than the Jews were looking for in a Messiah, *realising, convinced and declaring boldly*, that Jesus was *more than human*. Later in Matthew, Mark and Luke we find Jesus putting the Pharisees on the spot on their understanding of what the Messiah would be, or rather, going by Jesus' words, their *failure* to understand. In Matthew 22, it is noted that "hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, *tested Him* - After dealing with that question, regarding the greatest commandment, *Jesus* then questioned *the Pharisees*, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? The son of *David*", they replied. Jesus said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him *Lord*?" St. John does not carry that same account from the other 3 Gospels, but often quotes Jesus strongly rebuking them on their spiritual blindness in not recognising Him as the Son of God.

Therefore, by contrasting tonight's text with passages like Matthew 22, we see that while the Jewish religious leaders, the people of Israel in general, were still looking for the Messiah who was a noble and powerful king descended from David, at least someone who *had come to know Jesus*, Peter, had grasped the history making revelation - *Jesus* was that Messiah, that *Saviour*. And that it was not as a *descendant of David* that He would save the Jews. Their expectations were not high enough, did not grasp the extent to which God's love propelled Him to go to defeat evil's capability to destroy people. *This* Messiah would indeed be able to *save*, everyone, because the Christ Jesus was ó He *is* - the Son of *God*, God with us.

Earlier in the four Gospels, we find, of course, the angels announcing the coming of and then the birth of Jesus as the *Son of God and Saviour*, John the Baptist declaring that Jesus is the Son of God, Andrew hearing that from John and believing, then Nathanael also believes it. The frightened disciples in the boat also declare this ó as do certain demons. But such recognition and declarations by people who had come to know Jesus are quite limited, even by those who had asked for and been healed, though some address Him as Son of *David*, indicating a reference for that other Messiah they were hoping for.

And then we come to Jesus' questions in our text. Some Biblical commentators feel Jesus is making an assessment of the readiness of the disciples to carry on the part of His work He will be leaving for them and their successors to continue. For He knows His return to Heaven via the Cross is fast approaching. Have the disciples *grasped* the essential nature and supernatural extent of what has happened on Earth with His birth? Do they really understand Who He is and all that He has been showing them and teaching them over these three years or so of the nature and power of God's love? And how by faith they can call on that power to carry on His saving mission for the redemption of humanity? Will they comprehend the transaction, the forthcoming *victory*, of the Cross?

With the blessing we have of the Gospels to enlighten us, we can see the ups and downs of the disciples over those years they spent with Jesus; but let us not underestimate the magnitude of the change in perception, perspective and comprehension required of them in order to do so.

William Barclay, for one, considers the geographical setting for this scene tremendously important in framing the backdrop to the task at hand. Commentaries tell us that the region called Caesarea Philippi at the time Jesus and his disciples stopped there for this discussion was an especially pagan region. The latest addition at that time was a temple of *white marble* dedicated to the *Caesar worship* to which Rome had descended. Before that, it was called [Panaea] Panias, with its shrine to the Greek idol *Pan*, following its conquering by the successors of Alexander the Great. It was also littered with temples for the ancient Syrian idol-worship of *Baal*. And it was very iconic to the Jews also, as it is believed to contain one of the sources of the River Jordan. (As an aside, to jump forward to the present, in more recent times the water routes have been tampered with. Panias, now called Banias, is located in the Golan Heights, whose annexation by Israel continues to be disputed by Syria and the rest of the Arab world; so jostling religious beliefs continue, and Christ goes unrecognised.) But Barclay feels Jesus may have seen that backdrop of multi-idol worship, plus the River Jordan's symbolism for Judaism, as significant for His questions that would bring to the world a dramatic new focus on God.

In answer to His first question to His Disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is, they" respond that there is some speculation He might be one of the old Prophets the Jews expected to return before the coming of the Messiah. Then Jesus removes any wriggle room and demands a *personal decision*, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Notwithstanding the responses of the others in Matthew 14:33, it is *Peter* who responds now: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Jesus emphasises the *significance* of this response by His comment that this insight had been *Divinely* revealed to Peter by God and that on *that confession* by Peter, Christ would *build His Church*.

Those two cores of this Scripture passage are no doubt well enshrined in your Christian Endeavour identity, with your motto of, "For Christ and the Church" and your guiding principles, headed up by "Confession of Christ". As for the whole Church, it is obviously essential that we get *that* part right first, *that confession*. For if we do *not*, everything else we do will fail in that critical test for the Christian, Christ's simple call, "follow me". Christ made that abundantly clear right from the outset of His announcement to build His Church, as Peter became painfully aware. So it is not good enough for us to believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, *without* understanding, *and responding*, to what that really means. God, Christ, is not Who *we* say He is. God does not act according to what we say He must or must not do, though He generously calls on us to pray, asking Him for certain actions. God is Who He is. God *is*, as He told Moses. *Our role* is to find out *all* that *means*, to obey *Him* and to follow *Him*. In a world crowded with lost guides, and with lots of bends and darkness, we cannot follow someone we do not know *distinctively and instinctively*.

And that is a major risk for us today. Peter had recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah and believed He was the Son of God. But at that stage he had not fully put all that together.

Peter, however, had been immersed all his life in that hope of the Jews for the conquering Messiah that would save them from all the oppression they had suffered, though we know a lot of that had been brought on by their disobedience of God. *We* do not have that excuse. We have had the Gospels about Jesus all our lives; and corporately speaking the Church has had 2,000 years to perfect that understanding of the nature of God in Christ revealed, and to teach it. And Christianity *has* made a tremendous impact on this world, for its good, by obedience to Christ, despite our many gaps in that. And I am entirely thankful that I have been able to live under a system of laws, civic practices and relationships based on Christ's edifying revelations of the precepts of God; and not on some other religion or alternative world view that fails to recognise God's redeeming love and the inherent dignity in which that cloaks each human.

But how secure are we? As I look at modern Cayman, and the countries that helped refine that understanding of Christ over the centuries and used it to shape the protections and aspirations we enjoy, the backdrop seems to look increasingly like that surrounding Jesus and His disciples in our text. It is not difficult to picture the shrines to the carnality, abandon and idleness with which the myth of Pan was associated, or the gleaming marble of emperor worship. In fact self-worship and idolisation of all kinds comes across pretty strong; but especially in many of those who somehow command more income than anyone can reasonably be worth. Or when we find ourselves with more power than the extent of our humility can handle. In the US it has been reported that CEOs of fast food chains earned 1,200 times as much as the average employee (not even of the *lowest paid* employee!) [The Nation 24/4/14]. Going to the broader workforce, a new analysis released by the AFL-CIO concluded that "In 2013 the average American CEO was paid 1774 times what full-time minimum wage workers made". A big change in that direction has also been seen in Britain in recent years. I do not know what the ratios are in Cayman; in such a tiny economy they cannot be as bad; but I know the same "emperor-complex" exists here. Despite such disparities, the outcry is always on the need to hold down the *minimum wage*, or in countries like Cayman, that it is the *introduction* of a minimum wage that will bankrupt us! Why do we seem consigned to repeating the same mistakes over and over? If people do not want to look at the moral of the manna and other examples from the Bible, we should be equally warned by secular history. Injustice and moral bankruptcy have a way of coming to an end. It might sometimes seem to take a long time; so some will bet that they can enjoy it all for the rest of their earthly lives, and that is as far as they see. But what about you and me? We believe in *ó* no, *more* than believe, we say we *follow* - a *just* God. So surely we cannot sit back content, waiting for injustice and immorality to consume itself as it is corroded away from both the inside and out.

As you embark on your next 87 years, if today's backdrop seems similar to Caesarea Philippi, let us not forget that when Christ announced He would be forming His Church, He also made it clear He was *turning things upside down* *ó* in order to turn the world *back to right side up*! A key question for us here tonight seeking to follow Christ and serve His Church is, are we doing enough to turn our world right-side up?

St. Peter must have been turned upside down just a few verses later, when, for his fervent good intentions, he went from being congratulated by Jesus for his insight into the Divine to being called a stumbling block and told to "get behind me, Satan." Jesus knew who it was trying to misuse Peter in his state of confusion from hearing the *Messiah* say that He must be killed - and apparently not catching the key point of the *resurrection* three days later.

Peter did not equate *early death* with the victorious conqueror the Israelites knew the Messiah was to be! I like the way this shocking change is described by Presbyterian Minister Timothy Keller, in His book *King's Cross*, based on the Gospel of Mark: "There is something else Mark wants his readers to think about. Isaiah says the Messiah will come to save us 'with Divine retribution'. But Jesus isn't smiting people. He's not taking over the world; He's serving it. Where's the Divine retribution? And the answer is, He didn't come to bring Divine retribution, He came to bear it. On the Cross, Jesus would identify with us totally. On the Cross, the Child of God was thrown away, cast away from the table without a crumb, so that those of us who are not children of God could be adopted and brought in."

We still have those tendencies that Peter exhibited then in his passion – we jump to a conclusion that we know what God should be doing, instead of listening carefully to what He *is going* to do, and learning what we must do in order to share in His victory. Like everything about Christ, about God, the command to "trust God" has a deep meaning and can never be limited to a one-dimensional connotation. God in His word is no doubt making a serious point about "meditating on the law of the Lord *day and night*". Are we still prepared to invest fully in God's law? Does our "confession of Christ" meet the standards, the integrity of content, on which Christ will continue to build His Church? For we know He *will* build it and it will not topple, just as we read tonight. And He *continues* to build it. Christianity is still growing even as so many of us in various nations now lament its decline. Why these declines? Is there a shortage of suitable material with which to build? Christ demands integrity in the blocks of faith with which He builds; and does not always find it. "Why call me Lord, Lord, but do not do what I say?"

"Do". Christ's call on us is a call to *action*. Believe, Follow, open, seek, love, obey, trust, give, do – and do *not*. This last point is not very popular; and today again it is attacked on many fronts. Yet God continues to call us to a better way of living. John Stott makes the point that "in every age" He called His people "to be radically different from the prevailing culture in their *values, standards and lifestyles*." Stott points to God calling on the Israelites not to do as they do in Egypt where they used to live – nor as they do in Canaan where He was taking them. And then as early as Matthew 6 we find Jesus telling His followers not to be like the religious hypocrites – nor like the pagans! Certainly God is love; Christ is love and He loves us purely by His grace, not because we are such nice people. That is why He is still building His Church – because there are people that have not yet been saved and He does not want to lose them. Because Christ is bursting with love and compassion and free grace, we can all have hope, as we remember Him spontaneously reaching out to the grieving mother as He passed her son's funeral procession, miraculously intervening for His wealthy friends Lazarus and his grieving sisters, healing the untouchables, the poor, the powerful, protecting the adulterer and evangelising the shunned woman at the well.

And shocking His followers with the news that while they thought that the command to love your neighbour was tough enough, that was just the kindergarten standard God started them off with when He first began to fashion a people to Himself. The real standard for them was to love their enemies! And I have long recognised that God's love and God's justice is meant for the *individual*; it *has* to reach the individual. That comes across clearly in both Testaments. It's not something we can feel good about talking of in big concepts of justice for society or for the majority, if the Levites' Concubines of this world remain unprotected fodder.

But it is equally necessary to think carefully of which individual is the object of Christ's love and in so meditating not forget those still to be born. God's yearning love for each of us does not mean we can no longer have certain standards because it might offend someone or even as the world chides us to remember "Christ is love", "God forgives". Bonhoeffer strongly warns us away from the danger of the twisted concept of "cheap grace". Even as Christ defended, offered forgiving love, stopped the self-righteous condemnation, He did not *condone* - or even *ignore*. He does not like His people being hurt and adultery hurts individuals, often for generations; people hurt themselves by settling for debasing lifestyles by which they end up unable to face themselves in the crowds at the well; children without love hurt. In Matthew 15, right before tonight's passage, we hear the loving Jesus state: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. *These are what defile you.*" As He had pointed out, God did not send Him to overturn God's *righteousness* but to fulfil it, *perfect* it in our hearts *once* we bathe ourselves in His sanctifying light. No one should cherry pick St. Paul's writings on grace, the Christian and God's law of the Old Testament, to try to justify something else, a licence for immoral living as he himself put it. For Stott calls it *Basic Christianity* when he reminds us that St. Paul, for example in that beautiful verse of 2 Cor. 3:3, echoes *both* core points of what God had promised in the Old Testament. "I will put my *Spirit* in you" (Ez 36:27) *and* - *and* - "I will put my *law* in [your] minds and write it on [your] hearts" (Jer 31:33). And Christ in His great love for us was equally blunt in stating His purpose or that the *world* though Him *might* be saved, while making it equally clear that only those who *repent* and *believe*, as a personal, individual act, would *actually be saved*.

He knows our weakness, and is ready to forgive our mistakes, and though He does not condone or ignore unbridled sin, no matter who tries to redefine such a concept as narrow and prudish, Christ continues to seek out the unrepentant sinner. That again is the essential nature of His love, and again has remained unchanged throughout human existence. Like the Son, God the Father cried out repeatedly: "repent and *live!*" Furthermore, Christ insists that if we truly believe in Him we must not forget who we too were before opening the door to His grace, and *we* must follow Him in undertaking that search.

There again we come face to face with the multi-dimensional nature of God that we cannot afford to miss, and which so many dismiss. We can only be saved by God's grace, we can never save ourselves by attempting to be good. But once saved, we have to ceaselessly do good! However, it's not that God does not know whether our confession of Him was *true* or not until He sees what we do. It is so *we* will know. For if our heart was not truly opened to His Spirit and absolute *lordship*, no matter how much our lips confessed, we will *not* have been saved. And Jesus said we will only know that *truth* or otherwise by the types of fruit we are actually bearing.

Christ's question continues to demand that personal answer demanded of His disciples, Who do *you* say I am? And we who identify ourselves as recipients of God's grace manifested in Him must not answer lightly or unadvisedly. He is *love* in incomprehensible, yearning fullness. He is *righteousness*. Or, as I reverse that order to console myself in my more introspective moments, Thank God His righteousness is equalled by His merciful love! He is *truth*. He is *so much more* or for He is "the Son of the Living God". And He must be *the* Lord of our lives if we are going to be saved. Therefore, the questions we must indeed Endeavour to answer each day remains, Who do *you* say Christ is? Who does *your life* say Christ is? Amen