

RECOGNITION

Isaiah 50. 4-9a

James 3. 1-12

Mark 8. 27-38

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I would like to start my talk by telling the story of a legendary woman in Britain (who shall go unnamed). During all of the last century, until she died some years ago, she had captivated, convulsed, scandalised and enslaved both men and women by her astonishing beauty, extraordinary honesty and wit. She was utterly refreshing, alarmingly unpredictable, and had one vanity: short-sightedness, which she never advertised with glasses or contact lenses. So her glorious face would turn blankly right at you until something you said or a gesture she knew, helped her to pin your identity. There was one horrifying occasion which she related to a few close friends about herself: at a grand diplomatic reception, a quietly-spoken woman turned to her and talked of this and that. Something in the voice of the person warned the legendary woman. Suddenly, she realised that she was talking to The Queen and swept into a deep curtsy, saying as she did so, ‘Do forgive me, please, Ma’am! I didn’t recognise you without your crown on.’ What The Queen replied is not recorded.

Recognition can come as a shock, glad or unpleasant. One of the great barriers to recognition is the habit we all have of holding on to preconceived notions about people. In our mind’s eye, a person may be tall. So we are predisposed to consider tall people, and when a short person comes into view, we are not ready; and recognition is delayed, perhaps disastrously. I read a poignant sketch some years ago of a young sailor who had been receiving letters from a woman. She had written to him faithfully, and he had built in his mind’s eye a picture of a pretty young thing.

They had agreed to meet. She would be carrying a flower, and sitting on a certain bench in a park they both knew. A little old lady, carrying a flower, came and sat on one end of the park bench. The young sailor appeared and sat on the other. The lady held her flower high. The sailor glanced, but looked away. He got up and left. He left the unrecognised writer of those letters crushed and alone. He hadn't recognised her.

People ran into this same difficulty with our Lord. Many people (his own brothers included) failed to recognise his Messiahship. There were lots of conjectures. If he doesn't observe the Sabbath, some said, he cannot be a man of God. If he is a drunkard, others said, he cannot be anything very much. If he is a crowd seducer, or a lying demagogue (as still others accused him of being), his claims have no weight. Some took him to be a prophet. The common people listened to him gladly, much to the frustration of both the aristocracy and the academics who disliked each other, and hated Jesus more. Christ's claims were outrageous. People were making guesses.

Listen to what St Mark records about this (7. 27-29): 'Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Note what the common people who listened to our Lord gladly did when they assessed him. They put him at the top with their popular list of famous people who knew many of God's secrets: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the Prophets. They cast our Lord in the role of one who came before the Messiah's arrival. They all, every one of them, failed to make the connection.

So Jesus put the question to his group. ‘Well, that’s what they say. What do you say?’ Silence followed. And not uncharacteristically, Peter jumped in. Peter, the great initiator, the man with no more brains and possibly less than some of his co-disciples, but with an extraordinary courage of his convictions, and occasional insight.

There are times in our lives when we are surprised to hear ourselves saying what we say. I suspect that this may have been such an occasion in Peter’s life. From his lips tumbled his inspired confession, ‘You are the Messiah’. Peter had recognised our Lord for who he is. And in that instant of recognition, we, all of us, are in a new ball game. For this ball, this rounded earth, this globe, has its God walking on it in man’s clothing. Within this man’s chest cavity beats the heart of God who created the world.

Note one thing. This glorious recognition did not save Peter from making more than a fool of himself several times, later. It did not, at that stage, guarantee a loyalty to the man he recognised as the Christ of God, the Messiah. There were shameful moments ahead for Peter, and bitter humiliations. But the disciples were presented there and then, with Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Christ. Perhaps he said what some were thinking. But at least he went ahead and said it. He made the natures of Christ, human and Divine, a spoken reality to his companions.

Discovery. Recognition. Articulation. What Peter found himself doing and saying has something to say to the Church today, and to you and me. One of the reasons why we are here today, and one of the reasons why we are where we are in Guernsey is to *proclaim our Lord as Christ*; and to make him a recognisable reality to the people who belong to us and to those who are still outside our doors. The people outside St Stephen’s will surely be attracted by a church family that shows itself to be healthy and alive, with a grasp of the reality of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection; and with a grasp of the reality of the hope and promise that Jesus offers to the world.

As I see it, the job of St Stephen's (and indeed of other churches in Guernsey), is to proclaim loudly and clearly that we are interested in Christ Jesus: Christ who was crucified for Guernsey and for the world, who is risen for Guernsey and for the world, and to challenge the people of this island and the world to *commit their lives* to Christ as Saviour and Lord.

I imagine that you, like me, have frequently been awed by people's sense of commitment to their jobs. They work hard, and they work long hours. It is clear that many people are used to *committing themselves*, and in particular to committing themselves to their professional lives.

How wonderful it would be if we could see the same level of commitment on a spiritual level! The Church-at-large (with a capital C) has not yet tapped that source of energy which commitment brings with it. And we should have done so.

Commitment. That is what Christianity is about. Commitment that is not defined by obligations, rules, or pressure to attend meetings; rather, Christian commitment that occurs spontaneously and naturally, when all the juices are flowing and all the blood is racing, because our souls are enjoying a love experience. Such commitment is not obsessed or besotted. It is simply commitment released into love, with all the marvellous characteristics that the love experience brings to the surface of a life. Harness *this* power of commitment to the Church, and its force for good will not only be noticeable, but unstoppable.

Like the people who surrounded our Lord, many people today have become confused about Jesus's role. We often see it in human terms, in terms of human rights; human justice; world peace; global health challenges; and our response to terrorist threats. All of this is of course right. It is right to apply Christ's role to the

immediate (and sometimes alarming) human situation in the world. He is involved in all the suffering and deep water that daily confront us.

But we also have to proclaim Jesus as Lord; as the Christ; and his role in the Godhead. He is the Saviour of the world; and that is both Peter's insight and his declaration. Discovery. Recognition. Articulation. Our job is articulation: saying whom we have *discovered and recognised* by faith.

I believe that the Church has things to say, both old and new, about the Christ whose life fills the world, and who waits to be recognised for who he is. Because he is God as well as man, as Peter recognised and confessed, things are not always what they seem with Jesus, and people stand in desperate need of being told.

Let's do it.

Amen.