

## RE-CENTRING

Isaiah 51. 1-6

Romans 12. 1-8

Matthew 16. 13-20

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

‘But who do you say that I am?’ I wonder sometimes if we take this question to be our Lord’s mid-gospel exam. We are about half-way through Matthew’s account of the gospel. So it makes sense that Jesus might gather his disciples together and say, ‘All right, let’s see what you’ve learned and if you really understand. Who am I?’

Most of us know the right answer. We’ve read Simon’s answer. ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Today’s gospel passage is not, however, about giving the right answer. This is not a test. This is not about what is in our head; it is about what is in our heart. It’s about what lies at the core of our existence. Christ is asking the disciples to consider what *centres their lives*. What is the axis about which their world turns? It is not enough to just give the right answer. The disciples are to *become* and *reveal* the answer by their lives, words and actions. For our Lord, those things are foundational to a life of discipleship.

We all have some ‘centre’ from which we live. People, things and experiences tend to become our anchor point and the centre of our lives. They give us our bearings and stability. Our centre orients our lives and the direction we take. Our centre not only shapes how we live; more importantly, it shapes who we are becoming.

Our spouses, children, friends or other relationships can easily become the centre of our world. Sometimes it is our beliefs and opinions that become that centre. Or for some of us, anger or fear can live at the centre of our lives, as can profound loss and grief. For others, love and beauty may be the defining axis of life.

Who, or what is our centre? Whatever it is, that centre is capable of propelling us, enlivening us and helping us to grow; or it can keep us stuck in the same old place and stagnant.

We often discover what lives at the centre of our world when the experiences and circumstances of life knock us off kilter. When that happens, everything is thrown out of whack and we struggle to regain our centre. At those moments, sometimes we discover that we have settled for something other than Jesus on which to centre our lives.

Christ is the true centre. The fact that he is the true centre does not mean that there will not be difficulties, pain or losses. Rather, it means that when they occur, the centre will hold; and we all need a centre that will hold. In Jewish midrash (which is a word for the rabbinic teaching and preaching on the scriptures), it is said that Israel is at the centre of the world. At the centre of Israel is Jerusalem. At the centre of Israel is the temple. At the centre of the temple is the holy place, the Holy of Holies. And at the centre of the holy place is the Ark of the Covenant, the presence and glory of God. Underneath the Ark is the foundation, the rock upon which all rests.

The imagery of that midrash takes us deeper and deeper to the centre of the centre of the centre. That is exactly what our Lord is doing with his questions in today's gospel.

'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

'But who do you say that I am?'

In the first question, Jesus is asking what the disciples hear and see around them. In the second question, he wants to know what they see and hear *within themselves*. Christ is always pushing us to go deeper, to look within and discover who or what our life

is centred on, and then to re-centre. But some of you may say, 'We are followers of Christ. Isn't he already our centre?' Maybe so, but the life of discipleship is one of continual re-centring.

'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,' Simon answers. This is more than just an answer. With those words Simon has re-centred his life. Our Lord is the axis around which Simon will present his body (to quote our text from Romans) 'as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.'

'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.... I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' Jesus renames Simon. His Greek name is *Petros* which in English means 'rock'. Simon is now Rock. Whenever we re-centre our lives on Christ, we become a new person. Every time the lines of our lives converge on our Lord, we become rock-like. We become part of the foundation, or the rock on which the Church rests; we become part of the new Ark that holds and reveals the presence and glory of God.

With all our frailties, we might be surprised that Jesus chooses humans to be the rocks on which he builds his church. We are not, however, rocks that are unmovable or unchangeable. As water slowly forms and shapes a rock over time, so does a lifetime of re-centring form and shape us to be Christ's foundation in this world.

Re-centring is our life's work; and it is not easy work. It means that we must continually let go of what we thought centred our lives and move to our true centre: the Messiah, the Son of God, the living one. The opportunity for re-centring is hidden within the ups and downs of our life. It is something that we do over and over again; and we don't always get it right. Look at Peter. He is the one of little faith sinking in the water. He doesn't understand the parables. He argues with our Lord and ends up being called Satan. He falls asleep when he is supposed to be

praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He denies knowing Jesus. Yet through it all he was being shaped, formed and moulded into the rock Christ knew him to be. Ultimately Peter was crucified for re-centring, following and loving his Lord.

Despite what it may look like, Peter clung to the centre. There is really nowhere else to go. Jesus's words, 'You are rock and on this rock I will build my church,' are words of life. They were life for Peter and they are life for us. What Christ says to Peter, he says to all of us.

'Who do you say that I am?' Don't just answer his question. Go *live the answer*. Discover the 'rockness' that our Lord knows you to be. Live with hope in the midst of despair. Love your neighbour as yourself. Though the gates of death open to you, know that they cannot prevail. Care for the poor, feed the hungry and defend the oppressed. Offer forgiveness despite your anger. Pray when you are too busy to pray. Love your enemies despite your fear. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. Practice generosity in a difficult economy. Re-centre even when it feels like you cannot stand up. Do it. Be the rock; be the rock on which Christ's Church stands before the world.

Amen.