

## 21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011

*a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP at S. Andrew's Church, Romford*

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*Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8 and Matthew 16:13-20*

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### INTRODUCTION

"If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" That's an old question but it can still bring us up with a start. What does it mean to be a Christian, to bear that name? The story we have just heard seems to deal with a similar question: "... *who do you say I am?*" Jesus asks his disciples. And when St. Peter blurts out, "*You are the Messiah (or the Christ) ...*" Jesus warns him not to tell anyone. So just what does it mean to bear the name of Christ?

The struggle with identity is one that affects us all, if we give time to reflect on the great existential question, who am I ... ? Am I this body? The thoughts that pass through my mind? The feelings that constantly shape my actions? Am I my job, age or gender? After all, I might say, 'I am a priest: an old woman; an alcoholic'. The fact is we can be all these things, yet none define who I am. Which is why the dictum Know thyself has, since ancient times, been seen as the beginning of wisdom.

### THE PROPHECIES AND HOPES OF ISRAEL

There was, and is, a deeply held belief amongst the Jews concerning a Messiah-figure who will enable a perfect society to come into existence, one in complete harmony with God and free from external oppression. Yet the identity implied by the name, Messiah, has, over time, changed and developed.

The verses we heard from Second Isaiah begin a long poem on the restoration of Zion – the salvation of an exiled nation which form part of the Messianic hope of Israel. 'Hewn' from the 'rock' of Abraham, they were waiting on God to restore them to the Land promised to Abraham and his descendents. But they had to learn this would be no easy matter; salvation would come through the sufferings of Yahweh's Servant.

### THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

In our Gospel reading Jesus, of course, identifies Peter as that 'rock' from which the new people of God will be hewn. But there's an important difference: the promises God makes to Abraham concern the blessings of the Land, whilst those Jesus makes to Peter concern that Kingdom which transcends every nation. What is similar is the call to a faithful waiting on God. The two passages bear striking similarities. Not only the image of 'rock' but also the material that surrounds the stories. Just as the first is set in the context of the Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the liberation that will follow, so Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God immediately precedes the prophecy of his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

S. Paul uses this image of 'rock' to identify Jesus when he writes in I Corinthians: "*... our ancestors all had the cloud over them and all passed through the sea. In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptised into Moses; all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink, since they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ.*" (I Cor. 10: 1-5)

And, as if to highlight this imagery of God as the rock which Abraham and Peter reflect, Jesus names Simon as Petros – rock – in the shadow of the vast ranges of Mount Hermon from where the Jordan springs at Caesarea Philippi. Yet the rock-like identity of Peter can hardly be seen in the faith he shows in his Messianic-Saviour. Peter fails, time and time again, of course.

But then, salvation doesn't depend on us but on God's faithfulness to his people. It is that which inspires our faithfulness and binds us into an intimate relationship with him. The focus must be on God: it is not our faithfulness to God that saves us, but God's faithfulness to us.

### **JESUS' IDENTITY AND OUR RESPONSE**

So Jesus realises Peter has had an insight into his identity. Peter names him as "Messiah/Christ" and with that name comes all the associated baggage. Yet the question remains – who do you say Jesus is? And our response will determine what it means to be a Christian. To say a good man, a social reformer, the fount of Wisdom, or the model of human contact have the potential to mould who we are.

Many years ago, when I first began going to church, I was hit by the thought, "If Jesus is the Son of God, then he is the most important man to have existed and my life cannot remain unaffected by this fact." In the reading we heard from St. Paul's 'Letter to the Romans' he writes of the way we are to respond to this understanding of Jesus as the Christ of God: *'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.'* (Roms. 12:2)

Perhaps those words, 'discern what is the will of God', are fundamental to understanding what it means to be a Christian. What is the will of God for me as part of the Body of Christ? And that requires a deep listening to God in the silence of the heart. It is this 'Stature of Waiting', as someone once described our deepest calling, that has the capacity to change us. That silent waiting on God, with our eyes fixed on Him, which seeks to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us that we might be changed into more of the likeness of Christ. *'By the mercies of God, ... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'* (Roms. 12:1)

St. Peter's understanding of who Jesus was changed as his relationship with him developed. And as his understanding matured so did his own identity. We have hints and guesses as to who we are beneath our outward appearance. Beneath the surface of our lives lies ... the reality of who we are. It is comparatively easy to say 'Jesus is a good man, a social reformer – even a prophet'. Can we say, "He is the Christ, the Son of God"? And, once having said that, to accept we will be changed by affirming that identity. It may take many years to come to that moment and to know that everything will be changed through our affirmation. Jesus knew the dangers of thinking we know what it means to stick a label on someone, to say we know who they are.

It is the stature – the quality – of our waiting on God, and our desire to be changed through that relationship, which matters. Our waiting on God to reveal himself is meant to change us. Simon became the Rock on which the Church was to be built because of his ongoing relationship with Jesus. Imperfect as it was, there was a love that bound them.

Jesus asks that same question of us: "Who do you say I am?" And, depending on our response, we are changed.

There is a beautiful Orthodox prayer which believers offer immediately before receiving the Sacrament, which says:

*“I believe and confess, Lord, that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first. I also believe that this is truly Your pure Body and that this is truly Your precious Blood. .. Receive me today, Son of God, as a partaker of Your mystical Supper. I will not reveal Your mystery to Your adversaries. Nor will I give You a kiss as did Judas. But as the thief I confess to You: Lord, remember me in Your Kingdom”.*

*Amen.*