

**SERMON FOR THE 21ST SUNDAY IN  
ORDINARY TIME 23.8.20**

**ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD**

**REV JORDAN GREATBATCH**

What comes to mind when you think of the word identity? Perhaps your driver's licence, your passport, your family, your culture, your ancestors, whakapapa, your name. Or perhaps it's the newly coined phrase identity politics? Whatever it may be, identity is an important thing to us all. Identity can be a wonderful thing used to give a person purpose, but it can also be something that divides people, and causes harm.

I am thinking of the recent political and social conflicts in the United States. In my view it is all about identity; the importance of identity but also when identity becomes problematic. One of the ways it becomes problematic is when one identity

see's themselves as superior to the other. Not just in skin colour, but perhaps culturally and socially.

As we heard the reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning we invariably heard a lot about Identity.

So in what way is identity explored in today's Gospel? Well if we go a few verses back from today's account we have Jesus being challenged by the religious leaders. This challenge is by way of a demand, a demand that he give them a sign from heaven to display his power and affirm his identity as a prophet. Jesus refuses and tells them that no sign will be given. He then goes on to warn his disciples to avoid the Sadducees and Pharisees and their demand for a powerful sign.

So here we have Jesus refusing to show a sign of power and warning his disciples of Israel's religious leaders.

Jesus and his disciples arrives in in the city of Caesarea Philippi. And it is here that he in fact

continues the lesson on power and his identity. It is no coincidence that Jesus continues his speech in the City of Caesarea Philippi, because this was a city that was all about power and identity.

The city was in fact the residence of Herod and his son. They were the rulers of Judea through their cooperation with the Roman Emperor. This city, Philippi was given to Herod the Great by Caesar Augustus.

It was then named Caesarea Philippi. The name Caesar in honour of Caesar Augustus and his gift. As Herod's capital, the city functioned as a centre of both worship and governance. The place epitomised the relationship between political, religious and social power. Herod was effectively a puppet leader for the Romans and they used him to great effect to keep the area of Judea under their power and control. Herod did this by promoting taxes to Rome and taking his cut and making sure that Roman occupation and exploitation was uninterrupted.

So if there was any place to do give a lesson on power and identity, this was it. So Jesus did exactly that. He asks his disciples 'who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they say, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He then says to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'...

'But who do you say that I am?' Before we hear the disciples response, I wonder how we would respond to such a question? We do not live in the first century. But the same issues of power and identity still trouble us and our world today. Caesarea Philippi is in fact situated between modern Jordan and Syria, a land that in modern times has been ravished by war, abuse of power and the crushing of different identities.

But these problems of abuse of power and empire don't just exist in areas of war and conflict but are

a part of our economic and political entities. If we think about the nature of giant 'corporations' who like great empires often dehumanise and oppress. We are often so unaware of these forces at work, because they make up everything we do. The fast food we eat, the clothes we buy, the coffee we drink, all these things have the potential to come to us through the exploitation of others.

Corporations have the potential to become so big that they can rival small countries in their profits and power. Even Thomas Jefferson the third President of the United States foresaw this over 200 years ago. He famously said "I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial by strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country."

We witness people who wield power over others all the time, using rhetoric that demeans and dehumanises. It is a narrative that continues, but it

is also an old narrative that Jesus and his followers knew even 2000 years ago.

So how did the disciples respond to Jesus question on identity? 'But who do you say that I am? Well Simon Peter replies 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And like a hammer shattering rock, Peter's confession breaks through and reveals to us that this Jesus is more than just a prophet, or a zealot, he is revealing to us who God is.

Jesus responds 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'<sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the

Messiah. Here the power of Peter's confession is brought to its full stature. The solid 'rock' of Empire is shattered by the 'rock' of a poor peasant fisherman. It is this band of peasants who hold the key to God's Empire, which is found not in the oppressive power of the Herod's and Caesar's but in the love and humility of a back water Galilean.

Jesus' identity is now realised among them. It is both disturbing and wonderful. It is saying that God's kingdom is not just a kingdom of the invisible and eternal things, but just as much about the muck and mire of our present world.

Jesus by identifying himself with the Hebrew prophets John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah continues that narrative of standing against injustice and abuse of power. Asian theologian C. S. Song put's this idea so clearly.

Song grounds his theology of the reign of God in the message of the Hebrew prophets and the preaching of Jesus, especially the parables.

From these sources he derives the conviction that salvation includes political and economic salvation. The God of the Hebrew-Christian faith, he says is a 'political God, "God's politics mean two things; it is a "politics against the barbarism of power," and it means that "the God of the prophets, and... the God of Jesus Christ, is a God who takes... the side of the oppressed."

Song is quick to point out that God's politics does not mean that Christians should replace secular power and government with another, perhaps sacred power and government of their own to bring about the Kingdom of God. Rather, "it aims at the transformation of power. And in this transformation is found the essence of God's politics."

God therefore challenges us to challenge the empires of our day, those who abuse power and oppress the weak. And so Christians must confront

every form of violence, injustice, and rage with good, with peace, with justice, and with compassion – in imitation of Jesus' own words and actions, and in imitation of God, with the power of the Spirit. We need to be informed, we need to be aware of the Empires of our day, and we need to always be challenging the rhetoric of fear and intimidation.

But this is an extraordinarily difficult task, one that the giants of history have walked and often lost, at least in their lifetimes. We live in such a violent world, a violent world that often silences the voices of Justice. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Justice is hard work.

But if we profess the identity of Jesus as 'the Son of the Living God' as Peter did then we are called into his identity and purpose. His identity in today's passage is in direct conflict to all that injures and destroys, all that goes against the purposes of God.

It encompasses all that goes against the identity of human beings in god's image. Be it lack of food, water, shelter/clothing, medicine, health care, education, work, human dignity. Or freedom from fear and violence, a sense of basic security, the right to practice one's religion, to assemble and organise, to be protected in a court of law, to speak the truth, and to have hope for the life of one's children. It is what every human being deserves just by being human.

Therefore Jesus calls us into a new identity, but an old story, the story of God at work through all the messiness of the world and our lives. It is God's story; it is the story of humanity, it is our own story, God invites us to continue write it together.