

Matthew 16:13-20
21st Sunday Year A 24/8/08 Mary Mags

What's in a name? In the days when such pets weren't politically incorrect, a family in my first parish had acquired a tortoise and asked their children to name it. The children were clear that the only name for a pet tortoise was "Xavier". The parents were somewhat puzzled by this, and asked why. "Because it's what we say in church" came the reply. Still more baffled, the parents asked for clarification, at which point the children chimed as one "As our Xavier tortoise, so we pray...."

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet. Romeo, doff thy name, and for thy name, which is no part of thee, take all myself." Shakespeare, as is his wont, bewitches us with his beautiful language. However lyrical its expression, Juliet's reasoning is quite false. She is a lovelorn teenager with a mind as clear as mud. Romeo cannot give up his name, his identity, and magically become someone else, neither can she no longer be a Capulet. They are who they are, and their tragic fate makes all too clear the impossibility of denying our identity by claiming that our name is no real part of us.

Our subject this morning is a name, in fact several names. Peter names Jesus, Jesus names Peter. Peter's famous confession takes place at Caesarea Philippi. That is our first important name. The setting is a town

which had been given to Herod the Great by Caesar Augustus. His son Herod Philip, the Tetrarch, enlarged it and renamed it in honour both of himself and of the same Augustus Caesar. So Caesarea Philippi is named after two powerful earthly rulers – the local so called King, and the late ruler of the Roman world – two men of politics and violence who know all about kingdoms, about power and about glory. Or they think they do, St Matthew might put. His gospel tells us something rather different about kingdom, power and glory, suggests a rather different sort of king with a rather different sort of rule.

Who do men say that I am? There are various possible answers – John the Baptist, perhaps, or Elijah, or Jeremiah or another of the prophets. More names. All these suggestions make sense in their own way. Those who have seen and heard the mighty works and words of Jesus locate him within the history of God's saving acts, as one of the chosen messengers and truth bearers of the Lord, set apart to speak his word to the people of Israel and to the world beyond. But the disciples, and chief among them Simon Peter, know that these suggestions will only take us so far. The mould of history must be broken, the context of the past will not suffice for the kingdom of the future. Who do you say that I am? You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. You are the messiah, the anointed one, the successor of David who comes to inaugurate the new and unending Kingdom of heaven which is breaks into the confines of

earthly politics and contemporary history to establish the reign of the God over all peoples.

Peter has made his dramatic confession, he has given Jesus a title – you are the messiah, the son of the living God – and it is a title which will become a name. Very early in Christian history, and we are not entirely sure how, Jesus of Nazareth becomes known by follower and onlooker alike as one “christos”, the messiah, the anointed one, so that Christ to us is more of a proper name than a title, and not just a name, but the name, the decisive utterance of naming which defines the identity not just of the person receiving the name, but of the person who is doing the naming.

Christology is the name we give to the intellectual study of the identity of Jesus. This passage from Matthew’s gospel is one of its most important bases. But we misunderstand New Testament Christology if we do not recognise that it is also anthropology, that is, that the identity and activity of Christ tell us what it means to be human, to be the people we are. Nowhere is this clearer than at Peter’s confession. We are all familiar with the question “Who do you say that I am”, a question which preachers – quoting Christ – are fond of firing at congregations. But just as Christ asks us about his own identity, and we reply in the person of Peter, so we – and Peter – are justified in returning the question to Jesus

– Lord, who do you say that I am? The scene Matthew presents has a beautiful symmetry so that it is precisely when Peter has told the truth of who Jesus is, that Jesus tells the truth of who Peter is. You are the Christ. And I say to you that you are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I shall build my church.

It would be fair to describe those words as among the most controversial in the Bible, because of their use in later Christian history. It seems to me clear that Jesus words about the rock and the building of the church are aimed directly at Peter, and signify a special role Peter has as the leader of the apostles in the mission to build the church, the community, within the world. Protestant attempts to diminish that face value reading are simply unconvincing. However, very little follows from that about the later institutions of Christianity, and it’s also clear from disputes such as that in the letter to the Galatians that the idea of some sort of universally accepted primacy of Peter’s authority is a later tradition which Western Christianity has retrojected into the first century.

More important for you and for me is the question of identity. Jesus gives Peter a name. Peter reminds us of another Biblical figure, another founder, given a new name. Abram became Abraham, and his calling was to be the patriarch of the Lord’s chosen people. As with Abraham –

the father of many - Peter's name is his calling. He is chosen to be central in the building of the Christian community.

We too are called by Christ, and that calling is decisive in the fundamental question of who we are. We learn from this story that acknowledging Jesus as the Christ – as Peter did – has consequences, the consequences of being called. If we make that acknowledgement we must respond to the consequences. If we confess Jesus as the Christ, we must listen when he tells us who we are.

So then, who are you? What are you called to be? What are you called to do? Every time you utter the word Christ you are joining yourself with Peter, telling the world that your identity is given by Christ, your calling is that of a disciple. And it is no ordinary disciple to whom you are joined. Once Christ claims our identity, it cannot be revoked or renounced. Three times Peter denied his Lord, and yet that same Peter is the rock of the Christian community. My denials, my failings, my stupid and selfish sins are not threefold but closer to three thousand, and yet I cannot cease to be the person Jesus Christ has made me. Neither can you. You are the person Jesus says you are, the beloved child of God, the one called to follow in the way of the cross and work to establish the kingdom on earth. To acknowledge Jesus Christ is to ask him your very own question: Lord, who do you say that I am?