

22nd Sunday A Mary Mags 31/8/08

Matthew 16:21ff, Romans 12:1-3

One would have thought that the Christian church – having had the gospels to read for all but a few of two thousand years – would have grasped the basics by now. Sometimes I wonder. This week's gospel reading from Matthew not only follows on directly from the story of Peter's confession which we heard last week, but should not be separated from it. The questions of identity which we considered last Sunday – Peter names Jesus as Messiah, Jesus names Peter as the rock – have to be understood as defining not just who someone is but what it is they are called to do. This is made clearest in the insistence of three evangelists – Matthew, Mark and Luke – that the statement that Jesus is the Christ must be followed by a statement that he must suffer betrayal, persecution and death.

I should be grateful, because my task this week as a preacher is very much more of the same. Last week I insisted that confessing Jesus as the Christ – something we all do every time we say that word – comes with the consequence of being called, of having our own identity defined by Jesus Christ himself. If we confess him as Christ then it is he who tells us, as he told Peter, who we really are. This week we see just how start

those consequences are, just how radical that calling is. And once again it is Peter – the rock, the foolish, irascible, passionate and cowardly hero of the early church, Peter the type of all true disciples, who shows us ourselves in his reaction to Jesus' words.

Remember the scene: at Caesarea Philippi, a place named for earthly kings, Peter is given the unique privilege of uttering the eternal truth about Jesus, that he is none other than the Christ of God. As a result of this true confession, this acknowledgement of Jesus' true identity, he receives an identity of his own. The renaming of the chosen disciple – Simon who becomes Peter – echoes the renaming of Abraham and of Jacob, and identifies this disciple as the rock, the foundation, of God's new people. Today we hear of Peter receiving another name. Jesus speaks of the necessary suffering and death which are to follow, the consequences of his obedience to the Father. Simon Peter takes issue, but is sharply rebuked. His confession of Jesus as Messiah made him the rock on which others are built, but his denial of the necessary suffering of that Messiah transforms him from that rock into the stone against which others will stumble, the source not of building up but of falling down. And so this time he receives a different name, the name of Satan.

Both these new identities belong to Peter, just as they also belong to you and to me. Every time we acknowledge Jesus as Lord we contribute to

the building up of his church, and every time we turn away from the gospel of love we become the opponent of God, the one who accuses his people, who persecutes his children. You and I are Peter and you and I are Satan. It is an uncomfortable truth, but a truth nonetheless.

The reason last week's gospel reading and this week's gospel reading must be taken together is that it is not enough to realise that our identity is defined by Christ, essential though that lesson is. There is more to the lesson, because there is more to Jesus than simply calling him Christ. There is following him to the cross.

Fast forward in the story. Both Mark and Matthew place Peter's confession of Jesus close to the middle of their gospel texts. If we read ahead and look to the end, we will find another equally important discussion in which the identity of Jesus and the identity of Peter are at stake. Jesus stands before his accusers in silence. The High Priest is outraged: "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God". Jesus said to him, "You have said so". This runic reply is used two other times by Jesus - You have said so, to Judas, confirming him as the betrayer; and "You have said so" to Pilate, confirming that Jesus is the King of the Jews. In other words, like those others, the High Priest speaks the truth he does not wish to believe. Jesus is the Christ of God. The response of his accusers is swift: he is

condemned for blasphemy, beaten, mocked and sent to be delivered to death by the Romans.

But the next stage of the story is not Jesus being sentenced to death, in fact not Jesus at all. From within the high priest's house, the realm of aristocrats and rulers, we go outside to the courtyard, to join the servants trying to keep warm by the fire. And here we find Peter. He too is asked about his identity – aren't you also with Jesus the Galilean? And of course, rather than accept it with silence, he denies it with an oath. I am not who you say I am. Peter refuses the identity given him by Jesus, but does so in folly, for it is inescapable. What he is saying, in effect, are the words "I am not who I am."

The lesson for Peter, the lesson for you and for me, is the second essential truth about Christian identity. First, we learn that if we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, then we are who he says we are, our identity and our calling is one and the same. Second, and just as importantly, we learn that that identity, that calling, cannot be separated from the cross of Christ. Just as Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah is followed by his satanic refusal to accept Jesus' true mission, his call to suffering love, so at the end of the gospel when these questions arise in obvious mortal crisis, as a matter of life and death, so

Jesus accepts his identity and with it the cross, but Peter runs away from his.

Peter is the type of all disciples, you and I belong in his place. His story is one of passionate failure, the overwhelming but misguided love and loyalty which blows white hot and ice cold just as does our love for Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the end of the story is not a sad one, because that same impossible Peter with his same impossible denial is the one we see in the Acts of the Apostles, boldly proclaiming the word and the works of God, preaching to the nations of the world the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Having finally learnt, that first Easter morning, all the truth about Jesus Christ he finally learns all the truth about himself: who he is, and who Jesus is, cannot be separated. You are who Jesus says you are.