

Jesus who?



Uncle Paul....Uncle Paul....Uncle Paul.....

That's not dissimilar to the sound of my young niece Heidi when she came to see Uncle Paul and Aunt Jeanette recently....I took Heidi around the churches of this benefice showing her the places that only a key can get you. We talked about the beautiful windows and she laughed at the frocks that I have to wear.....she loves anything old.....thankfully she has not yet found the celebrities of modern culture a draw away from the books and 'old' things...apparently that is why she loves her uncle Paul so much.....OLD!!

then came those words again.....

Uncle Paul.... but this time a question came also....who is this Jesus?

Oh there is nothing better than a 9 year old to ask those seeking questions.....and this 9 year old was not taking any half hearted answers.....one of her favourite words is 'why!'.....normally accompanied firstly with the words.....but uncle Paul....

Of course I knew the answer...I'm a curate, I know everything....but how do we explain who Jesus is to a 9 year old....or even an 99 year old....if that person does not have faith...or has never known faith.

I can't and wouldn't try and compare Jesus with a modern-day celebrity such as Justin Bieber or M and M (is that a rapper or chocolate?... You can see how 'down with the kids I am')

I know I would cause more confusion by trying to talk about this kind of celebrity....and that confusion is seen in the bible when people talk about Jesus.

The apostle Peter seemed to have had a similar problem. In the passage of Scripture immediately preceding the gospel text for today, a turning point in the ministry of Jesus is described. He had been teaching, healing and becoming involved in conflicts with the religious establishment for some time. Crowds of people had been coming out to see Him, and Jesus was a hot topic of conversation. Everyone was asking who this man was.....He was fast becoming a first-century celebrity. And celebrities, then and now, are the objects of rumour and speculation.

"Who do people say that I am?" asked Jesus of His apostles. He wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth. Evidently, Jesus had been getting some 'fake news' type coverage. The apostles told Jesus the stories that had been going around. Rumour had it that He was a reincarnation of some hero of the past, some religious leader of days gone by.

You can just see the news headlines: "WHO IS THIS CARPENTER TURNED MIRACLE WORKER, COULD THIS BE A REINCARNATION OF THE PROPHET ELIJAH" or "THE SPIRIT OF BEHEADED JOHN THE BAPTIST RETURNS IN HIS COUSIN FROM NAZARETH." Sounds off-the-wall, but rumours about celebrities are often like that, aren't they?

Turning to Peter, Jesus brings the question closer to home. "Who do YOU say that I am?"

This puts Peter in a sticky position. It's one thing to talk about other people's opinions and speculations. It's quite another to go on record expressing your own beliefs. It's easy to talk about other people's views, you can evaluate, ridicule, renounce or commend those views from a nice safe distance. You can play at being objective, even superior. If a certain position becomes unpopular and is attacked....well, that's ok, you didn't really agree with them anyway....that's just what Joe Blogs thinks...not me.

Jesus was insistent though...he wouldn't allow Peter that safety net. He asked him, "Who do YOU say that I am?" I felt an overwhelming responsibility when Heidi asked me that question, so I really feel for Peter being put on the spot like that.....This question was, and remains, the central question of Christian faith. The question is not, "Do you agree with my teachings?" The question is not, "Do you think I manage the crowds well?" Nor is the question, "Are you impressed with the miracles you've seen me perform?" The simple yet fundamental question is a question of identity:

"Who do we say that this carpenter from Nazareth is, this man we know as Jesus? Who is Jesus?"

Peter answered confidently, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

When Peter made that statement, that confession that we as Christians say each week, Jesus replied with obvious joy. He blessed Peter and made a striking claim:

"Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." In other words, "Peter, don't get too cocky, you didn't learn who I am from your own deductions or through your very human insight.

You didn't educate yourself into or reason your way to this truth.

This knowledge was not discovered.....but revealed.....

It is not a work of the human mind, but a GIFT FROM GOD.”

It's not all gold stars for Peter though..... Peter may have been the first to confess his faith in the great truth about Jesus. However, he confessed better than he comprehended. I am sure many of us here today believe Peter was right when he confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. But when it came to understanding just what that means, he tried to use human reasoning and a flawed understanding of scripture instead of listening to the revelation of God. This blind faith can all too often trip us up when things become difficult.

Shortly after Peter made his great confession, Jesus began to speak to His disciples about events to come. He would go to Jerusalem, face rejection.... suffer shame at the hands of the authorities..... be executed....and then be raised on the third day.

Peter could not believe what he was being told.

Wrongly, Peter thought he already knew what the future would hold for Jesus Christ and his followers. After all, he knew what his people needed. He had studied what others had taught about what the Christ would be like.... The Christ of his confession was God's answer to his people's problems. He was to be the warrior king who would right all the wrongs.

What Peter was not prepared to accept was that the Christ would right the wrongs of the world not by gloriously trampling all opponents, but by means of his own humiliating death, defeated and rejected by his people. A beat up, hung up, dead and buried Christ was about as far as anything could be from what Peter meant when he confessed to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Peter pleaded with Jesus....calling out this plan as not becoming of the Christ.....not the Christ of Peter's confession. No doubt Peter meant well. But Jesus' response was swift and sharp. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

Peter had stepped over the mark....This same Peter, who confessed the truth about Jesus, which was given by divine revelation, turns around and tries to define the meaning and mission of Christ. But he seriously blunders because he attempts to define the Christ by means of human needs and wishes. Jesus denounces this as Satanic. I am always taken aback by this comment....I feel Peter was treated harshly....but Peter had, unwittingly yet in good faith, offered an understanding of Christ that had little to do with what God intended. How we define Christ makes all the difference to how we follow Him.

If we define Christ strictly as a great teacher or even a prophet, then all we need to do is sit quietly and learn from His lessons.

If Christ is a well-meaning political revolutionary, intent on overthrowing the unjust powers of the world.... then we need to take up arms and let the revolution begin.

If Christ is a harmless, yet caring guy with good intentions, then we need to be careful never to offend or make others uncomfortable with what we say and do. We need to make sure we drive our cars at 20mph below the limit and always apologise for our beliefs.

But the Christ of the Bible....the Christ of my faith.. is different from any of these definitions. He was and is, in the words of scripture, begotten of God. He came from God in a unique way as the saving presence of God, to save us by enduring suffering and displaying the unfathomable depth of Gods divine love.

Let's admit it, we need to know more fully the meaning of the confession "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Our human perception and preconceived ideas often get in the way of a true confession. If we want to know Him more completely and follow Him more faithfully, we need look to Jesus alone to give us the definition of what it means to be the Christ. Only then will we know how to be His people.

If we'll not insist on defining Christ according to our limited experiences, human agendas, and questionable assumptions — but instead learn from Him — maybe we'll find that our confession means more than it ever did before the next time we confess "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

So....you may be asking yourself what was my well informed... new curate answer to an eager to learn 9 year old.....well....it may seem like a cop out but I gave her a bible to read.....a bible with a few well thought out words written in the front by uncle Paul. Her eyes lit up at this gift and I encouraged her to take time to read.....to get to know the Jesus Christ of HER faith....to build a relationship with the Christ of the bible....the Christ of her faith. I do also intend on sending her a copy of this sermon in the hope of keeping her interest peeked and those difficult questions coming.....

Learning and growing in faith is a continual process....just as Heidi starts her journey of discovery....I pray that you and I can also take a look at our own faith through the eyes of a child and keep on growing each day.