

## REFLECTION

Readings: Psalm 138 & Matthew 16: 13-20

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Sometimes, when we know that we need to have a particular conversation with someone, we try to find a gentle way in. Rather than jumping right in, we begin our conversation elsewhere: somewhere that we think might provide a springboard for the conversation we ultimately want or need to have. Or maybe it's that circumstances dictate where the conversation must start even if we believe that it needs to move in a different direction eventually, when the time is right.

When we meet Jesus and his friends in today's gospel reading, that's what's going on, I think. Recent clashes between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day have left questions hanging in the air. So, now that they've moved on and are away from that public glare, Jesus begins a heart-to-heart conversation with friends. He wants to discover where these recent experiences have left them. 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' he asks. It's a term they're familiar with and associate with him and, not being a particularly taxing question for people who've followed Jesus everywhere and been surrounded by crowds at almost every turn, it's a question they can answer easily.

I'm sure Jesus has a passing interest in what his friends reveal but it's clearly not what he really wants to talk about because he says nothing about the various suggestions that they offer. This was his gentle way in. But then comes the next question and it's – POW! – 'But who do *you* say that I am?' This has suddenly become incredibly personal and there's nowhere to hide. It's a question that demands a response. This is a 'What do you know to be true in your gut? What do you feel in your heart?' kind of question.

Circumstances dictate that many of the conversations that we're currently having in and around the Church concern the return to our premises and what is or isn't yet possible or practical in each local church's particular situation and context. This is understandable. It's now almost 6 months since we were last in them; we long to be back there together. I absolutely get that and share both the desire to return and the disappointment that we haven't yet been able to. But this can't continue be the only conversation that we have. It has to lead to others.

When Jesus poses his 'But who do you say that I am?' question, he seems to be taken aback by Peter's outpouring: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus could well have said, 'Whoa! I wasn't expecting that!' Instead, he puts Peter's insight and response down to a moment of divine inspiration. It is though enough for Jesus to pronounce his blessing upon Peter and to declare both that the yet-to-come-into-existence Church will be built upon him and that, in him, a further bond now exists between earth and heaven. But then comes a massive 'Shhhh!' moment as Jesus

rather oddly, and sternly, orders his friends not to tell anyone that he's the Messiah. *(For the record, he says nothing about being a very naughty boy either – if Monty Python fans were already heading there...)*

We could spend ages arguing about why Jesus might've said this – or why he offers this instruction (not to tell anyone about who he is) as frequently as he does in the gospels. Many pages have been written doing just that. But perhaps the best thing to do is to simply assume that Jesus had his reasons and the time was not yet right. //

There's always a danger when reading Scripture of falling into the trap of believing that every single word that's written applies to us today, that what Jesus said to his friends he also says to us, and that our reading of the text is the correct one – that what we understand his words to say is what his friends took them to mean. That's not how it works. Some words in Scripture were directed to particular people, particular situations, and we can have no idea how they were heard or received. But that's not to say that we can't learn from the experiences of others.

That's what we frequently do when we read the Psalms. The psalmists lived in a world far removed from our own and yet we look at their words, uttered in response to their experiences of life, and we borrow from them – or invest new meanings in them – that those ancient words may help us as we seek to respond to situations that we find ourselves in that render us word-less.

So why not read this gospel story and draw from it that there are times when, as followers of Jesus, we'll be called to fall silent? The Psalm we read earlier speaks of singing God's praise – an instinctive response that much of the Church has shared throughout its history – but Jesus suggests to his friends at Caesarea Philippi that, whatever their instinctive response to him might be, sometimes singing his name from the rooftops or to the rafters isn't the task in hand. Which might offer us some small crumb of comfort given that even if we were gathering in a church building this morning, we still wouldn't be permitted to sing together.

Our collective songs of praise have had to fall silent of late but maybe we have to understand that this isn't our primary task as followers of Jesus Christ right now. Perhaps that task lies elsewhere, and we'd do well to open ourselves to other questions, other conversations – as well as the ones about returns to church buildings – in order to discern what that might be?

After Peter had uttered his statement of belief in Jesus, Jesus declares 'My work is your work. What you do will have eternal consequences: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' He was speaking to Peter not us, of course. But in declaring ourselves to be followers of Jesus, members of the Church, Christ's body on earth, we have committed ourselves to this work.

I can't say too much about what Jesus then went on to say to his friends – because Steph has that task next week – but I think I can at least divulge that Jesus shared

with them something of the implications and cost of discipleship and warned them that life with him was unlikely to be a bed of roses.

We're living through challenging times, but discipleship has always demanded that Jesus' followers look to the world beyond them and engage with it. Jesus calls us to immerse ourselves in the life, pain and messiness of the world. And that suggests to me that, however difficult and painful we're finding the current situation there are still other things that we need to have conversations about. We've done well at caring for one another in recent months, but we can't just content ourselves with taking care of our own, there's a world outside our windows. What are the greatest needs on our doorsteps? How might we respond as more people lose their jobs? What should we say or do as food poverty becomes even more prevalent or as and when hotels are no longer prepared to house rough sleepers? What is our contribution going to be to any public discourse surrounding the mental health crisis that's building? How are we going counter the lies told by Governments and the media concerning migration and work to build the welcoming society that God calls us to help shape? How are we going to put our own house in order when it comes to racism, sexism or homophobia? How can we raise the plight of those around the world already living in desperate situations who now have the added challenge of Covid-19 but little or healthcare to rely on?

The list of questions is endless. We can't do everything at once or on our own. But neither can we ignore such issues and focus only on our own needs, longings and desires. Our conversations have to reflect this.

I know that in the light of this pandemic especially, people worry about the future of the Church, but we need not fear: the Church will always have life so long as it continues to be the vehicle for transformation that it was created to be – the gates of Hades will not prevail against it, Jesus says – but in order to be that vehicle it has to look outwards. Which means so must we.