

Risk takers - Who do you say that I am?
Sermon 27th August 2017

If I were to ask you here, “Who do people say that I am?” Given the context, you might be able to say that I am a priest at St Catherine’s. You might also know that I’m a wife, a mother and a grandmother, and that I have a brother - so am also a sister and I possibly have *some* friends!

In turn, I would hope that if I were asked about you, I would know *something* about you, even if it were just your first name, jobs you do in church - some characteristic about you!

Over the weeks, as we have been reading in the Gospels, the disciples have witnessed a lot of healings including last week, the Canaanite woman’s daughter ... Miracles they’ve seen including - Jesus walking on water.

And they’ve experienced Jesus’ teachings of The Beatitudes, He taught them how to pray with the Lord’s Prayer and they saw The Transfiguration.

So when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” - And they reply; well some say you are John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

And then Jesus asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” It is amazing to me that they don’t say; “but we have been with you and know you can’t be John the Baptist because we knew him and he’s dead, you can’t be one of the prophet’s including Elijah because we saw him with you at the Transfiguration, so to me you are.....!”

Instead I feel sure there is an awkward silence

Until Simon Peter.... Simon Peter who always elbows his way in, opens his mouth and usually puts his foot in it, would go on to cut off the High Priest’s servant’s ear to protect Jesus, and deny him before the cock crowed the same day.

Simon Peter takes a huge risk as he pronounces, “You are the Messiah - (*meaning, anointed by God, empowered by God’s spirit to deliver His people and establish His kingdom*) “You are the Messiah - the Son of the living God.”

It’s a bit like that moment when you are sitting round a table and they start talking horribly about someone and you are trying to distance yourself by not getting involved, but your spirit rises and you can’t hold it in, and you say - this is not right and if you are going to carry this on like this I have to leave! You have just exposed yourself as a Christian!

Your risk for flagging up your faith is losing some ‘friends’ or even family - the risk for Simon Peter declaring Jesus King, flagging up his faith and the mission of Jesus and his willingness to be involved, was dangerous to the authorities it could mean his death. He has exposed himself and his allegiance.

The purpose of Jesus’ existence in the flesh was that people would come to a true picture of who God is and what He has done for our salvation -and I don’t know whether at that point Simon Peter really understood the significance of his response, but it is the moment

that Jesus blesses Simon Peter and declares him Peter (which in Greek means rock) and Jesus says - I believe with a hand on his shoulder, "... on this rock I will build my church". Risks - do you take risks for your faith? Or do you like the other disciples follow Christ, but keep quiet about it?

King's College London, my full time employment (something else you might know about me!), knowing I'm a priest assigned me to offer pastoral care for the students - with strict instructions - the first was don't say *anything* to do with God, second was don't mention that I'm a priest and don't touch - Jane, no hugs!

So I realised they wanted a talking shop for students - they'll come to me with a problem and I talk it out with them and send them on their way. Management get good scores for pastoral care on the Student Survey, which has slipped significantly over the years and everyone is happy.

Well, I can do that - I can talk the hind legs of a donkey... that is until I spoke with a Muslim student who had experienced a death back home in Pakistan - she was in the middle of exams and couldn't go home. She was in such a state of grief and depression. I got her talking and as she talked, it was apparent that her faith was important to her, but she was beginning to doubt. "What do you know about God?" she said.

Hmmm. What do I do? Do I keep quiet and see her in pain? Do I risk my boss's screaming fit by not sticking to the remit? As the sole earner at home - do I risk losing my job?

Suffice to say, I risked it and told her I was a Christian - she was so happy to be talking to someone of faith about faith - and yes, she was grateful for a hug! We had lots of sessions together and she recommended me to students and staff who were having "a bad day".

Sometimes a risk in faith is dangerous.... Christians who couldn't flee and are held under the IS regime know what that feels like. They have stood with Jesus - our brothers and sisters have gone through tremendous hardship, humiliation, torture and death for their faith.

For us, it might not be as dangerous, but there might be casualties, there may be losses, but we are called not to hide our faith in Christ, we are called to proclaim the Gospel, and we do that by loving God with all our heart, soul mind, and strength; and loving our neighbours as ourselves and we are slowly transformed as we try and live by faith in Christ. Does it mean that we won't sin - No! - But we will be a little bit more aware of when we do, are sorrier and hopefully, learn by it.

Peter eventually understood what his revelation of Jesus Christ meant and lived his life as Peter, 'the rock'. The same Peter, who vehemently denied Jesus in his hour of suffering - goes on to be the first witness to Jesus' resurrection in Luke and is the first Apostle to proclaim salvation to the Gentiles. The Book of Acts shows he held a key leadership role for the disciples for many years and his speaking qualities, along with his Epistles, helped to call the first Christians.

Only you know where you are in your faith journey - whether you are overflowing in faith, have much, a smidgen as small as a mustard seed, or something in-between.

But like Peter everyone has to answer that question of faith “Who do you say that I am?” for themselves in their heart. That answer isn’t based on past revelations or past evidence of God working in your life, Jesus isn’t asking “Who do you say that I was?” It’s the present tense, “Who do you say that I am?”

And that answer of faith can be risky. It may mean a bit of embarrassment - Peter, after being blessed for his revelation of Jesus - a few verses down was rebuked by Jesus and he was told “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matt 16:23) It may mean losing friends or family - like Abraham who left everything he ever knew - by faith (Gen 12:1-5). It may mean leaving something behind - some of the disciples at Jesus’ request of “Follow Me....” “They immediately left their nets and followed Him (Mark 1:17).

The promises of God for that risk of faith we take by declaring Jesus Christ as Lord of our life is worth much, much more than anything we could ever want or need, for example:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt 11:28-29)

“Most assuredly, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24)

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

“For I know the plans I have for you”, They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

“For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear or harm.” (Proverbs 1:33)

Like Peter, we may be a bit clumsy, thoughtless, careless, grumpy or headstrong, but God is able to use us. The Lord said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9) *We* just need to have faith.

Let us pray:

Draw near to God,
all you who long for faith,
all you who strive to lead a godly life.
Draw near to God,
all you who believe,
all you who have proved your faithfulness.
Draw near to God,
all you who trust in the promises of the gospel:
the good news of Jesus Christ for all.
Draw near to God.

Amen

Revd Jane Elliott’s sermon notes for Sunday 27th August, 2017.