

St Peter's Patronal Festival - 29/06/2017

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

If I may take the opportunity, I'd like to say what a privilege it is to be with you this morning/evening. It's great to finally be here, with and among you.

As is often the case in the gospels, Jesus' questions are more important than the answers.

The gospel of Matthew, more than any other, is associated with building the Kingdom of Heaven. And appropriately, on the day which we celebrate the patronal festival of this church, it is Peter's answer that interests us from the many given by the disciples.

Who do you say the son of Man is?

It is a somewhat leading question. But the answers are interesting. The answers are individualistic.

They are (mostly) well thought through. They come from the people Jesus has gathered around him with different skills to hear different things. Accordingly, we hear a plethora of answers.

Some say John the Baptist. Not a bad guess - the Son of Man, according to the prophet Isaiah, was to be despised and rejected by mankind like John - shut up in prison. John certainly suffered for his preaching and baptising in the Jordan.

Some say Elijah. Again, not a bad guess. Elijah, taken up to heaven in a whirlwind according to the book of Kings is a herald of a God's return to re-make the world. A people under the power of an occupying power like the Romans would be keeping an eye out for a sign of change.

These answers are individualistic. They are the result of long thought, and hopeful desires.

They could come from all of us in different ways - perhaps not if we were asked who the Son of Man

was, but for different questions about the church, the issues we face as a congregation, a church, a world. That is good - it allows us to develop and share together.

But as we examine Jesus' next question, Peter's answer draws us deeper into the mystery of God.

Who do you say that I am?

Simon Peter's answer is not given to him by his own reason, but from his experience of who Jesus is and what he has done in his presence. If it is the same, or similar, to Peter's - the challenge for us today is to reflect on what difference that makes to us.

And one of the ways to help us think about the difference that this makes is to consider the name of the man who this church is named after.

Peter - or Petros in Greek means rock (the Aramaic word Cephas means stone). Even those of you who don't haven't come across this translation

must admit that it's a particularly poor play on words from the Son of God. It's definitely along the lines of:

'Ireland's capital is the fastest growing in the world. Every year it's Dublin.'

'I tried to think of a squirrel pun. But everything I thought of was nuts'.

You are a tough crowd. You're back with me though! Jesus is describing the nature of Peter - in the same way that his questions go to the very depths of our nature - as children of God called by name.

Peter is a rock. There are some excellent qualities to rocks. They are stable, reliable, useful, durable. If you need more proof - take a look around this building. There is something reassuringly solid about rocks.

Jesus sees this in Peter.

There is another side to rocks though. Unfortunately, in some places in our world they are used with violence, to put up walls, to break things.

If we scratch the surface of Peter, this is the other side of the man we see. Those of you who attended the Deanery Synod Eucharist on Thursday will remember Archdeacon Jennifer reminding us about some of Peter's flaws. He is asked by Jesus to stay with him in the garden of Gethsemane - and falls asleep. He cuts off the high priest's servant, Malchus', ear when they try to arrest Jesus - only for Jesus to stop him. Most importantly, he denies knowing Jesus 3 times before the crucifixion.

By calling Peter a rock, a brick, Jesus knows exactly what he's saying. He knows that Peter can be stubborn, unyielding, and has the potential to cause a lot of damage.

Nevertheless, Jesus offers him a choice to act upon his answer. Jesus sees through Peter and all of Peter's good qualities and bad qualities.

'Who do you say that I am?'

The question that is asked of the disciples, of Peter, is the one that is asked of us. Peter, in Matthew's gospel is often the spokesperson of the disciples. He weighs it up. All of his experience of Jesus' miracles, the wisdom of his teaching, remembering the fishing boat he left with Andrew at a strange invitation. He looks deep into himself. Cuts to the core, the heart, the truth, the rock of an answer.

'You, Jesus, are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God'.

This is Peter's answer, as food for reflection on this patronal festival. What is your experience of Jesus, and what would yours be?

Amen.