

21st August 2020

Dear Friends,

Hello, and how are you this week, I wonder if any of you have been on holiday, or simply managed to get away for a day out, I wonder how that felt, did you enjoy it, or has it made you anxious. Things are changing all the time aren't they, regulations about shielding, about shopping, about how many people you can meet with etc. Children and their families are preparing to return to school, young adults are preparing to go to University for the first time, and others are facing all manner of changes in life and in work, people who have made plans now find those plans undone, as a Circuit we have not made a plan again, and are all finding our way to what prayer and worship might look like. For the first time in a long time I find myself thinking about Christmas in August, trying to imagine what it might be like, but having no idea how things will be when we get there.

Perhaps a good description might be of being all at sea, looking for a rock to stand on! A place of safety in a storm. The theme of the President and Vice President of Conference this year is "Best of all is God is with us" while we can certainly hold that to be true, and know that we have not been abandoned by God, nor are we being judged by God, as I have heard a few folk suggest, then how do we cling to that and find God in the midst of all that is going on in these times.

Maybe we take ourselves to another time, to the place in Jesus ministry where he asked the question "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?", followed quickly by the question, "who do you say that I am?"

***Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'* Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16: 13-20)**

On this rock I will build my church says Jesus, and what is that rock? The recognition that Jesus is the Son of the living God, and of course from there we are called to work out what that means in our lives and in the life of the Church, and in our times today! Jesus was surrounded by people demanding signs from him, the disciples continued to be confused, they were living in the context of great religious and cultural diversity, even where they were at the time, in Caesarea Philippi is important; Situated about 25 to 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, Caesarea Philippi was near a trade route that connected Tyre in the West to Damascus in the Northeast. A nearby cave housed a great spring that fed one of the sources of the Jordan River. The cave and spring had long served as a sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. Greek inscriptions and niches carved into the rock, still visible today, suggest dedications to other pagan gods as well! Thus, Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" hangs in the air at the intersection of economic trade, religion, and the power of the Empire.

Into this place of power where the temptation to trust in economics, or other gods is strong Jesus asks the question, and Peter answers, "you are the Christ, the son of the living God", you are the God revealed, the includer of the downtrodden and the outcast, the one who heals, who speaks peace, who breaks down barriers, The one who even in these days reminds us that we are not alone, not abandoned, even when we feel downcast or bereft.

Best of all is God is with us, as we cling to that hope do we cling to it through the lens of the statement made by Peter- do we see Jesus as the includer, the healer, the God revealing one who calls us to walk and work in his ways, who calls us to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, and reveals to us that our neighbour is much more than the person who lives next door, but possibly the unlikely one who comes to our aid, and calls us to set aside prejudices and attitudes that may have called that person unacceptable or even irredeemable! (Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan)

If we begin to see in this way, accepting that whatever Jesus reveals is what God reveals. Whatever God reveals is what Jesus reveals. Then perhaps like Peter and the disciples we receive God's revelation through engaging with the Jesus as revealed by the Gospels. The Jesus who called us to worship in Spirit and in truth, and not to become over worried about protocols or practices, the Jesus who broke the Sabbath rules to heal, the God revealed to us by Jesus is perhaps not the God that the people of his day, or of our day expected to encounter! This is reflected in one of my favourite prayers from the Iona Community:

We pray for those who need to forget the God they do not believe in and meet the God who believes in them!

I invite you to meditate upon that prayer, and what it might mean for you as we walk through these times together, how we encounter God in a time of pandemic, how we pray, who we relate to and include. There are many agencies working with the excluded, working in refugee camps, with foodbanks, and other aid agencies, both here and abroad, can we as the church become the revelation of the face of Christ as we are called to be his hands, feet and heart here on earth, and as we do so, can we do it as those who know the God of heaven, the Christ revealed one living within us?

I leave you to ponder all of that and I offer you this worship song:

*King of kings, majesty,
God of Heaven living in me,
gentle Saviour, closest friend,
strong deliverer, beginning and end,
all within me falls at your throne.*

*Your majesty, I can but bow,
I lay my all before you now.
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty.*

*Earth and Heaven worship you,
love eternal, faithful and true,
who bought the nations, ransomed souls,*

*brought this sinner near to your throne;
all within me cries out in praise.*

*Your majesty, I can but bow,
I lay my all before you now.
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty.*

*Your majesty, I can but bow,
I lay my all before you now.
Your royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty.*

I live to serve your majesty

May the God of heaven bless you and keep you, may you know the love of God revealed in you, and may the love of Christ be revealed through you as you live and work in the unforced rhythms of grace, in the power of the Spirit.

Once again, if you'd like to talk, please give me a call, you remain as always in my prayers.



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