

Ss Peter and Paul - 28th June 2020

Two questions for life: *Who do you say that I am? Who are you?*

In the gospel Jesus poses a more general question first – who do *people* say that the son of man (meaning himself) is? He may have a little interest in the gossip the word on the street but it's not what really interests him. Jesus cuts to the heart in a way only Jesus does time and time again. Never mind people – who do **you** say that I am? Only Peter answers the question – it is as if he is gripped by the spirit taken to heaven and back and the simple humble fisherman gives an extraordinary answer and becomes the metaphorical guardian of the gate – he holds the key. But he will soon show he didn't really understand his own answer. It will be a long hard and emotional journey before does understand and before the key opens the gate of the kingdom of heaven for him.

Soon Jesus will tell him “get behind me Satan” for saying he must not suffer, Peter will protest that he will not deny Jesus and yet does three times and weeps bitterly. Jesus is often hardest and most critical of those closest to him. The ultimate critical friend. Peter cannot even bring himself to say that he loves the risen lord completely when confronted by him on the beach. Jesus persists – “Simon – son of John do you love me?” It evokes the last of Peter's transitions from the hard rock like fisherman to broken humble friend. Oh lord you know everything, you know where exactly I am. He will indeed show the love Jesus desires - complete sacrificial love and not just affection – but that will be later when the spirit leads Peter's heart and soul whilst his persecutors lead his body to the same fate as his Lord. The promise given him in Galilee in the heart of Israel will only become true in Rome in the heart of the world. The keys spoken of in a little country will become ever his at the symbolic heart of the world - the keys now offered not to just a single nation and group of which Peter is just a humble fisherman but to the whole world like a shoal of fish he could never imagine on the little lake of Galilee.

That world – that catch: the world of free and slave, of Greek, Jew and gentile, of male and female, of nations and tribes and customs and laws; that world of disorder division and disunity will be brought to the key holder and the promise of freedom, of unity, of kinship, the promise of the heavenly kingdom. But they will largely be brought by another fragile clay vessel of the spirit - one not used to being asked questions but one who is more used to asking them. Saul the interrogator, persecutor, Saul the Pharisee the keyholder of a particular religion, set of laws, customs and love of nation. He will be made blind and different hardness broken and brought to his knees. Yet his character so very different, is still to demand the answer to a question – ***who are you?***

And the answer will come: ***I am Jesus the one you persecute.*** His life, purpose and understanding will be totally changed. His character, his preaching, his courage, his

energy will help bring all people to seek entry to the Kingdom of God through Christ not locked up in sin and hardness of heart. But first the cell of his own soul must be unlocked. When Paul asks his question on the road to Damascus he cannot see Christ but he can hear him. In his ears will resonate “I am who I am” from the scriptures he loves and he will have heard the claims of those he has pursued and persecuted – who proclaim the Christ who says “before Abraham was I am”. But now he does not laugh, scorn and scoff, his eyes and ears are opened to hear and see Him in the Old Testament and in the whole world. Saul the faithful Jew is answered by Jesus the rabbi of Nazareth himself and Paul’s eyes are opened to the glory of Israel the universal claims of God; Israel’s true calling and vocation and likewise his own. He will go on to proclaim to the Greeks at the Areopagus worshipping to an “unknown God” – what he now knows and cannot keep for himself. The keys are not keys to a private parlour for a particular tribe or nation, race or sect but keys to a universal kingdom and he will join Peter in the same fate and same place and receive the same ever blessed reward.

And what of us what questions are we grappling with today. Many hard ones no doubt, but we only need two to unlock them all – one God asks of us through Christ, one we ask of him - sometimes at our darkest and hardest times.

The first: Who do **you** say that I am? We never have it sown up and neatly figured out. Take Peter as your example ask for his prayers don’t give up – God in Christ knows just where we are – but he never leaves us there - if we allow ourselves to hear his question each day. And you may feel you get it wrong; you may promise with the lips and deny him in action, you may feel half-committed and not sure - but his loving gaze never left Peter and it will never leave you. And as we gaze back and answer the question again and again we will see God, for those who see Christ and who he is, see God himself and in the answering it is we who are changed.

The second question **Who are you?** You may be in a place of anger, of hurt, of bewilderment, of self-assuredness that has been pricked by illness, fallen pride, or a multitude of sin, a home truth, a place of sorrow or hurt of your making or as victim of another’s sin. Whatever the cause for being on your knees for being blind, for not knowing what to do or where to go – ask Paul’s question for you are never alone however much it may feel it. Ask Paul’s question **Who are you?** It will be a different answer for you are a different person in a different place; I hope not “Jesus the one you persecute” but perhaps the one who loves you, the one who dies for you, the one who says *I am* the light, *I am* the door, *I am* the way, *I am* the bread of life – follow me. Paul did and found out who he himself really was and what he was meant to be.

Two inseparable questions on this day of inseparable saints. Two questions for every day, for all our life that have the power to change our lives, as they changed Peter and Paul.

Blessed be Peter and blessed be Paul.