

Who do we say Jesus is?

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Pentecost + 12a – Ex 18-2.10, Ps 124, Rm 12 1-8, Mt 16 13-20

Our readings today invite us to think about identity. Moses' identity, Jesus' identity, Peter's identity and our own identity. This question of identity matters; if we're not clear about who we are, how can we expect others to know who we are? Vicky's just shown us about how someone can go from one identity to another; Moses moved from being a slave to a prince of Egypt, but without losing his connection with his family of origin. The Gospel today talks about a similar move. Peter goes from being just himself to being the Rock of the Church, and having the identity of Christ. He is still himself, but he has taken on a broader identity.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus poses the question of *his* identity to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They tell him what they've overheard in the crowds. People say he's one of their greatest prophets. But then Jesus asks, '[What about you]; Who do you say that I am?', and Peter answers; 'You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ... Is that what we would say?

Messiah and *Son of God*: those titles name the one God's people have been waiting and hoping for; the mighty defender and rescuer; the one to restore liberty to slaves, the healer, provider, giver of life itself; the one whose love is the very love of God.

This is the true identity of Jesus. Once we've realized this, it says something about our own identity as Jesus' followers. Imitating Jesus is our true identity and mission. Imitating Jesus shapes us, the Church, to be a body that is Christ to others. We are sent to offer his gifts of liberty, healing, compassion, generosity, hope, life, peace and love to all

comers – *rescue in the here and now*; not just the afterlife. The world needs to meet Jesus in us; in followers of Jesus.

Our NT readings both say the imitation of Christ is our calling; that being Jesus is our true identity. Did you notice in the Gospel how, as soon as Peter could name the true identity of Jesus, Jesus responded with a true identity for Peter? He changed his name from Simon to Peter; named him as one of the living stones of the Church; mortals who bind evil and set captives free; living embodiments of Jesus the Messiah.

As we see, what is true for Jesus the Messiah is true for all his followers. We're sent out from our baptism to provide people with the very gifts we see offered by Jesus himself; healing, hope for freedom, unconditional, loving acceptance, compassion, and practical support, freely given to all comers.

Paul tells the Christians in Rome essentially the same thing. Paul tells a community with a multitude of opinions about who they are that ^{12.5} *we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another*. Paul uses the analogy of a body to describe the fact that our differences are simply functional, like the difference between eyes and ears, feet and hands. Our calling is to work together as a body with a common mission to offer spiritual insight, practical service, wisdom, encouragement, generosity, leadership and hope. That's our collective identity; a Christ Body in this place, animated by the Holy Spirit. We are the Body of Christ in this place. That's who we say we are.

Who do other people say we are? Let's think about that for a minute. What people say is very much shaped by their experience of the Anglican Church. So if they've been hurt by the Church, they're likely to say we're judgmental hypocrites who protect our own; we protect our paedophiles, our wealth and our social prestige; that we tell people how to live and who they may love; that we're cultural imperialists who've

actively engaged in the genocides of original cultures in this and many other lands. Very severe stuff, yet understandable.

And people who have no connection with the Church? They're likely to see us as just another club or society; part of the establishment; another brick in the wall.

What do we do about this? The question is, when people encounter us at St John's, do they meet Jesus? If we're the ones who showcase Jesus – his blessings of sanctuary, belonging and journeying together with him – are we introducing people to the authentic Jesus?

For anyone who's browsing for an impression of God, what might they think of the goods we have on most prominent display? Are we what Jesus is really like? This is a question worth asking ourselves, both as individuals and as a community.

How we embody Christ – our Christian identity – is significant. Many people don't read the Bible. They're going to look at us, and on the basis of what they see, they'll form their opinion of Jesus. Will people recognise that we are offering everyone and anyone the glorious freedom of the children of God – like Jesus?

For some weeks now, we've had the opportunity of reading through the National Church Life Survey results for this parish. We can see what we value most highly and also what we most want to give attention to. We have a number of people who are interested in supporting social action and aid, and ensuring that new people are included. These are special gifts of this parish; spiritual gifts that we've been given. They're qualities which closely match the character of Jesus. But is that something that's visible both in our gatherings and beyond them?

At the moment it's not prominent on our website; I don't see stories of our day-to-day parish life there. Just a statement; *'St John's is an open and welcoming Christian community'*. I

can imagine a net-surfer seeing that and wondering, Okay, that sounds good! But is there evidence in what they do?’

As we look closely at our NCLS results we need to look with the eyes of people who might ask startling questions, ‘Will I meet Jesus if I come to this community?’ Will I find a sanctuary there? Will I find a community offering me friendship? Are there companions there for my spiritual journey? A seeker might say, ‘I heard Jesus got out on the streets and loved people. Does this community come out to find people like that?’

Who do people say Jesus is? We who say we are the body of Christ – does the life we live as his body mean people will really meet Jesus among us? ... I think so.

Who do people say Jesus is? We say we’re the body of Christ. Can we plan for a future where people will continue to meet Jesus among us? ... I believe we can.

Please pray with me that, by God’s grace, we grow as a community that makes Christ visible to others. Amen