

Written service Dorset South and West Circuit 23rd August 2020
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Welcome to worship today.

Take a few moments to be still and remember God's loving presence with us all.

Call to worship Long ago, Jesus called people to follow him.
That call still reaches us and we have responded
with faith sometimes strong, sometimes weak,
searching for greater understanding, greater love.
So we approach our worship with open minds and hearts.

Hymn Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult
of our life's wild restless sea,
day by day his voice is sounding,
saying: "Christian, follow me!

As of old, apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home and toil and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.

Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying: "Christian, love me more."

Jesus call us! By your mercies,
Saviour, may we hear your call,
give our hearts to your obedience,
serve and love you best of all.

Cecil Alexander

Prayer Loving God, our Creator, you have made us in your image,
people who long for better things and look to Jesus as the one
who can lead us on.
It is so easy to forget you amidst the things we do and the chatter of
our minds. We are so used to acting in our own strength that we do
not give you room to work within us. Set us free and give us strength
as you did for so many in Jesus' lifetime. May we know the joy of
your peace. We ask it in Christ's name, Amen.

Reading Matthew 16:13-23
Peter's Declaration about Jesus
Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked
his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And
they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still
others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But
who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the
Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 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. 18 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. 19 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."

20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Sermon

Who do you think you are? - used to be something an older person (usually) would say to a younger one who was getting above themselves. Now we know it as a television series in which, to quote the BBC, celebrities trace their ancestry, discovering secrets and surprises from their past. Very entertaining it is too. And all kinds of discoveries have been made, going back hundreds of years in some cases.

I also rather warm to this little joke..... the minister visiting a residential home asks one of the elderly residents "Do you know who I am?". To which the resident replies "No. You'd better ask matron" (must be an old joke!). What's clever about that is that it draws you into laughter and only then do you realise how true it might be, and might be of you, one day.

Jesus could well have asked the same question: Do *you* know who I am? After getting his followers to tell him what was being said on the grapevine, he now wanted an answer from them. And as usual, it is Peter who answers. "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Our Bibles all give Son a capital S of course. That's how Christian faith has come to understand who Jesus is. However there are no capital letters in the original language, and certainly not in the conversation between Jesus and Peter. Simply confessing Jesus as Messiah (or Christ) is a large step to take. Peter has acknowledged him as the Chosen One of God, promised for centuries, endowed with the Spirit of God himself, to bring in God's reign. Jesus warns them not to tell others. It would not be understood in the right way.

Do *you* know who Jesus is? Not in some academic way, or repeating a formula you have been taught. Is he someone in your experience of God, of life itself? Does coming to know him make a difference to you day by day? Although there will be common threads in our answers, there will also be things we struggle to put into words that arise out of what we have come to know deep inside ourselves. I will not want to make as many claims as some of you. But I do want to speak of Jesus is my way to God, the person who shows me what God is like. And in his dealings with me, shows me the relationship God wants to have with me. That makes *all* the difference.

How did Peter come to say what he did, out loud? Sometimes we all need to put things into words to know what we think. I'm sure he'd thought about Jesus' message and what it told his followers about him. He'd recognised the authority with which Jesus spoke. In his own life that authority had called him away from home to follow he knew not where. But from what I know of Peter in the New Testament, this actual confession will have been something blurted out without thinking. (Peter was always opening his mouth and putting his foot in it!) And Jesus' response bears that out. This was an inspiration. God had led him to say it. Therefore he was indeed blessed.

How do you get on when someone asks you about what you believe, or why you have certain priorities, or why you bother with church? Do you evade the question? Many of us do because we don't have the confidence to answer. We don't want to push what we believe down other

peoples' throats and so we avoid saying anything of value. We are not all Peters, who naturally want to say something even if it comes out all wrong. Perhaps we need to be more like him. When we are asked a question like that, it means someone is open to receive an answer. And they don't want something off pat. They want something from the heart. If it's difficult to put into words that's OK. As we struggle to express ourselves they will know it means a great deal and is beyond words. This is where we rely on God's Spirit to help us find something to say. And he/she wants to help us.

So Jesus calls Peter(Petros) the Rock (petra) on which the early Christian community would be built. This part of the conversation bears the marks of being exactly what Jesus said. For it is only in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, that the pun really works – the word is kepha/Kepha in both uses. Indeed Peter did become the central leader of the early Christian Church. We read on beyond the reading set for today, because I thought it important to note that this "rock" quickly became a stone to trip over, a stumbling block. Peter was inspired in his confession but in his understanding of Jesus' ministry he was still thinking in human terms, not with the eyes and heart of God.

Is it that pride came before a fall? Or that his inspired answer hadn't yet made a difference to how he saw Jesus' ministry? Perhaps some of both. It's so easy to let finding an answer to a deep question become your security. Then when it needs to move to a different place, or to be more flexible, it can turn into an obstacle. We remember that later in the Passion story Peter thought he could be strong and brave yet ended up denying that he knew Jesus. Humility was not his strong suit. It isn't mine either. But I know that is a weakness and I try to remember that when I'm sure I'm right or think my way or my way of putting things into words is best.

Do I know who Jesus is?

Who do I say he is? For others?

We can't ask matron! We do have the Holy Spirit alongside us to inspire and give courage. Let's admit that words are not adequate for this task, but they are usually all we have to answer questions.

Apart from actions of the heart reaching out to others of course.

It was St Francis who is said to have told the brothers, "Preach the gospel at all times: when necessary use words.

Hymn

Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

John Bell and Graham Maule

Prayers

Loving Lord God, we come to you now to pray for our world and those whom we bring on our hearts and in our minds.
As we begin to look to the future, we pray that those in government will have wisdom and compassion in their decision making.
May they remember the need for a greener future for our planet; may they find ways of rewarding those whose skill we have valued during lockdown; may they balance the needs of different sectors of our society with justice.

We pray for those who are suffering through coronavirus, or isolation, or overwork. Be their refreshment we pray.

And we bring to you those for whom we want to pray today – people whose love makes a difference in our lives; those with particular needs; those the Holy Spirit brings into our minds in a few moments of stillness. *Pause*

And we offer all our prayers with the words that Jesus taught us:
Our Father.....

Hymn

You are the Vine, we are the branches,
keep us abiding in you.
You are the Vine, we are the branches,
keep us abiding in you.
Then we'll grow in your love,
and we'll go in your name,
that the world will surely know
that you have power to heal and to save.
You are the Vine, we are the branches,
keep us abiding in you.
You are the Vine, we are the branches,
keep us abiding in you.

Danny Daniels and Randy Rigby

Blessing

May God's richest blessing be with you, and stay with you always.
Amen