

**Sunday 16th September 2018 (16<sup>th</sup> after Trinity)**

**St Faith, Havant**

**8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass**

*Isaiah 50.4-9a; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-38*

Have you ever stopped to wonder why we use so many different words when we're trying to talk about God? Or why we have so many different titles for Jesus?

Come to think of it, have you ever stopped to wonder what we even mean when we say the word 'God'? Can you define God? Can any of you tell me who, or what, God is, completely? The whole definition of God as Godself?

If you think you can, then I've got some news for you – you're wrong. It's not often a preacher can stand in the pulpit and categorically say that and be sure that it's one hundred per cent accurate, but I can about this. If you think that you can give a complete explanation, a complete definition of who or what God is, then you are wrong. You cannot do that.

And in reply, you might well say, 'but what about those verses of scripture that say what God is'? You might well reach for 1 John 4.16, for example: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them". And you're not wrong – God is love. But you only have to turn back a few pages to the first chapter of the same letter, and read in 1 John 1.5, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" ...and that's

not wrong either. God is love, but God is also light, and that's just in one short letter.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote that "we cannot know what God is, only what he is not". Clearly, that doesn't mean that we can't say *anything* about what God is – after all, as we've just said, we can say that 'God is love' and 'God is light' just from one letter in the Bible. What Aquinas means is that we can't say what, or who, God is *completely*. We can't fully describe God in Godself. There are some things that we can completely say for certain that God is *not*: so God is not evil, God is not gendered, and suchlike. I'm sure we can all think of our own examples. But whatever we say about who or what God is, it will never be enough to describe *completely* who or what God is. So when we say 'God is love' or 'God is light', those things are true and right, but they are not complete descriptions or definitions of God. Because God has no limits – there's another thing that God is not – limited – because God has no limits, there are no limits to who or what God is or can be. Which is why, if you think you can tell me the complete definition of who or what God is, I can with absolute confidence tell you that you're wrong. We can't do that. Nobody can.

So it's a very good job that Jesus didn't ask Peter, 'Who am I?' Because Peter wouldn't have been able to answer that question. Oh, I'm sure he would have tried. But once you start

trying to answer who God is – and remember always that Jesus is fully divine, he is God – once you start trying to answer that question, you'll never have enough words. Peter could have kept talking until the end of Mark's gospel. He could have kept talking until he died. Frankly, he could have kept talking right up until today, and it would never be a complete and accurate answer to God incarnate asking him, 'Who am I?' Instead, Jesus asks a much more important question: "Who do you say that I am?"

Whatever or whoever God is or is not, whatever or whoever Jesus is or is not, is beyond human telling in its fullness. But what Jesus wants to know of Peter is, what glimpse of the divine have you seen? What little bits have you managed to grasp? You can't know everything, but have you learned enough to work out where all this is going? You can't know fully who I am, so don't worry about that: who do you say that I am?

And Peter gets it right, and then gets it so spectacularly wrong again that Jesus ends up calling him "Satan". It is pretty much the story of Peter in the gospels, the man who gets it so right that Jesus describes him as the rock on which the whole church will be built, and then gets it so wrong that he denies even knowing Jesus who is about to be crucified. Peter had caught a glimpse, he had grasped a little, but not quite enough. He couldn't quite come up with a really good answer to the question "who do you say that I am?".

At least, not until after the resurrection. The Peter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles is very different. It is Peter who leads the decision as to who will succeed Judas Iscariot in the twelve. It is Peter who preaches to the crowds on the day of Pentecost. Peter does healing miracles, he settles doctrinal and pastoral disputes, he goes on missionary journeys. And he ends up in Rome, where tradition has it that he was martyred, put to death for his faith on an inverted cross. Peter may not ever have quite managed to answer Jesus' question in words, but his life became an eloquent testimony. Who do you say that I am? Someone worth living for. Someone worth dying for.

So, Jesus asks each and every one of us, who do you say that I am?

And we struggle for words – or perhaps we struggle to control our words. So we reach for what we can find, for words and images that are familiar and comforting. And that's fine. We aren't meant to give a full, comprehensive answer. We can't do that – it's impossible. Instead, we might go to the riches of Christian tradition, to a favourite hymn or poem or book. To a selection of well-loved and remembered Bible verses. To those words and ideas and practices that the church has agreed and passed down throughout long ages and across countries and continents, now given to us in our liturgy and in the creeds;

which serve as a reminder that although there is not one single right answer to Jesus' question, there are plenty of wrong answers. God is who and what God is; but God is not necessarily who we think, or hope, or wish God is.

However good our answers, though, however beautiful our words, they will all, always, end up falling short. Our limited words, our limited brains, will never be able to describe our unlimited God. We cannot say conclusively what God is. We cannot describe God in God's glory and in God's fullness. We can never say enough. We can never properly speak or write the answer to that question. But our lives, my brothers and sisters, our lives...if a picture is worth a thousand words, how many words is a whole human life worth? Every single thing that we say and do is a constant answer to that question. Our lives are a constant testimony, a continual witness about God to the world, and a continual confession to God about ourselves. Everything we do out there in the world, everything we do in the Pallant Centre and in our other buildings, and everything we do in here in church, what we do and how we do it, and what we don't do – every last detail about us says something about who and what we think God is. In every building and timing, in every action and inaction, in every word and silence, ask yourself: what does this say about God? Because God's question to us is very simple, and very important: who do you say that I am?