

Entering in

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—27 August 2017
Reverend Martin Johnson.

Exodus 1.8-2.10; Psalm 124; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”
From St Paul this morning.

Rowan Williams once wrote: “Perhaps baptism really ought to have some health warnings attached to it: ‘If you take this step, if you go into these depths, it will be transfiguring, exhilarating, life-giving and very, very dangerous.’”¹ To be baptized into Jesus is not to be in what the world thinks of as a safe place. Jesus’ first disciples discovered that in the Gospels, and his disciples have gone on discovering it ever since.”

Jesus’ extraordinary encounter with the Canaanite women that we heard last week and today’s encounter this time with his disciples reveals a deep humanity. Jesus’ conversation on the road to Caesarea Philippi results in two questions: “Who do people say that I am?” and then, “And you, who do you say that I am?” It struck me as a very human question from someone who must have felt the immense weight of expectation on his shoulders in the knowledge that, initially at least, he would never meet those expectations. Jesus was disturbing the status quo, that was his calling; but it disturbed him too, it disturbed his identity as a Jewish man: “And you, who do you say I am?”

There is a part of the baptismal rite which we will celebrate today called “The Decision.” The candidate or, in today’s service, the candidates sponsors (Toby’s parents), must answer a series of questions; they are of the same order as that question that Jesus put to his friends. “Who do people say that I am?” Now no doubt when the disciples heard the question there was some embarrassed shuffling of feet. They probably wanted to say, “Well some folk think you’re a raving lunatic, others say you’re a heretic and that you’re a dangerous individual. Do you want us to go on?” But Peter, bold as ever, speaks up; he gets the answer right, but what he doesn’t get is what it means, and he doesn’t get where it will lead him. Jesus was not the leader they believed the Messiah would be. Jesus knows this, and that is why we get the stern warning: “Don’t go telling everybody!”

Some of my earliest memories revolve around the Church. I can still remember some of my thinking concerning matters of faith. I can recall being given my first wrist watch and I became acutely aware of the passing of time. And from there I became aware of my mortality. It was at this point that I began the search for a personal God, but I was only six or seven. My theology, naturally, was weak ... my prayers seemed to go unanswered—understandable given the things I was probably praying about. But I do recall wanting proof, a sign! Now we know, don’t we? that this is not the way to approach matters of faith. If we have proof, if we have evidence, it is no longer faith. But we live in scientific times. Empirical evidence is called for in all things. Now some folk today, in response to this, have adopted a completely cynical, sceptical, approach that is impervious to the subtle, poetic, nature of spiritual proof. Others claim a certainty in which there is no place for doubt and we have seen the emergence of a fundamentalism or literalism. Jesus tells us in another place to strive to enter through the narrow door. It strikes me that that this narrow door is the middle way between absolute doubt and absolute certainty. It is also a middle way in our understanding of Jesus, that yes, he is

1. Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist* (London: SPCK, 2014), 9.

completely human with all the emotions, fear, joy, love, anxiety that goes with our humanity, but he is also the perfect reflection of the divine.

I think that, if we are completely honest, there are times when we haven't moved much beyond the disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Our response to the question, "Who do say that I am?" would still be somewhat incoherent—as probably our prayers are from time to time. We do find ourselves looking for proof of God, but often, like the disciples, we do look in the wrong place because our expectations of Jesus are skewed.

It is a little like standing outside an ancient church. The stone is dark and weathered and the windows are high up; you can't see in. Walking around the outside is a little like trying to find proof of God. Eventually you find a small narrow door. You may need to stoop to enter but, when you do and your eyes become accustomed to the unlit interior, you become aware of the beauty of the stained glass. What was dark outside is now radiant with light.

Not so very far from where I grew up is a little village called Tudeley. It's off the beaten track; nothing really of note to visit there. The church, All Saints', is a pleasant but modest building. In the sixties, a young woman of the parish, Sarah d'Avigdor-Goldsmid, drowned and her family commissioned Marc Chagall to produce a series of windows in her memory. At the base of the main window, a figure floats as in a wave and at the top is a scene of the crucifixion. The guide book for the church says that Christ looks down from the cross "a radiant and personable young man in whose company young people delight." Describing the colours, predominantly blue and yellow, the book says that, "these glorious golden hues radiate joy and hope for mankind and the promise of life eternal."

In it only by entering in that we can begin to grasp the nature of this person Jesus. Looking for proof, searching endless texts, watching documentaries, will not provide answers. This entering in begins at our baptisms and continues throughout our lives until that day when we enter in completely and see fully. The disciples found this entering in more than they could bear. Peter seems to have got it right, but when you continue reading this passage in Matthew you realise that he, too, has only half-grasped the truth and that, ultimately, he will struggle to enter in completely. We do, too. It is a narrow way, but this way is our calling our vocation.



We've heard this morning one of the most resonant questions in the whole of the New Testament. It is the question, it seems, of a man who wishes to disturb but who is also himself disturbed; of a man who has somehow found himself in deeper waters than anticipated; of a man at once baffled and intrigued by a destiny that he may have begun to glimpse but of which he is becoming increasingly aware. It is an affecting and very human moment. The call is to join with him, to join our humanity with his, unsure of where it may lead us, but full of faith that in doing so we are at one with God and indeed on the path of life. Yes, it is dangerous, but it is the path to life eternal. Amen.