

MATTHEW 16:13-24
LEARNING TO BELIEVE?

David Livingstone travelling through Africa and watching the water tumble over Victoria Falls. Shackleton, Scott, and Amudsen, exploring Antarctica and finding the South Pole. Hilary and Tensing, climbing Everest and standing on top of the world. Neil Armstrong and the other crews of the Apollo space missions walking on the moon. These are great journeys of discovery. How did it feel to be the first person to stand on top of the world, on Mount Everest, and look down on the mountains around about? How did it feel to be Neil Armstrong and be the first man to walk on the moon and find out what it felt like; you can prepare all you like in artificial conditions, but to be there...! His famous quote says something about its important: "that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," How did that feel? There has to be a certain amount of excitement to be doing something that no-one has ever done before, or even to be doing something yourself for the first time; you've never done this before. There also has to be a certain amount of fear: what happens if it goes wrong and these expeditions, all of them, were dangerous; people died trying to get to end of these voyages of discovery!

There are other kinds of voyage of discovery. Crick and Watson discovering DNA, being the first people to make sense of that and see its implications and the benefits that their discovery has brought to our world. Alexander Fleming, back from his holidays, discovering mould on one of his dishes and working out that this could help him with what later became penicillin. James Watt, supposedly watching a kettle boil on his stove and then seeing how this could be translated into engines to make machinery work, powering what became the industrial revolution. There are all kinds of voyages of discovery that people have made and they have achieved so much for our world that is good. For a time people thought some of them mad, that they could not make machines do what human energy and effort had been doing, so there was a certain danger and risk in these voyages, but they were exciting in so many ways.

There are personal voyages of discovery: you might not think that your voyages of discovery are anywhere in same league as these, though I'm not so sure; I want you to have that picture in your mind as we think about Peter and his voyage of faith-discovery with Jesus. We're looking at discipleship through the eyes of the disciples: we began with Matthew's call, a tax collector, an outcast, yet he discovers that he belongs with Jesus. Last week, we saw Peter and the others afraid in the storm, Jesus comes to them walking on water and Peter walks on water too. Today, we consider Peter's confession of faith, but how did he get there? He's not the finished article because he gets it wrong later. There are people we meet who seem sure of what they believe as Christians, who have a strong grasp of Christian faith and what to believe; we're not like that, so we worry. How much more do you understand of your Christian today than you did this time last year? Or than 2 years ago? Or than 5 years ago? Hopefully, we're on this personal voyage of discovery, exciting, uncertain and not yet finished!

Caesarea Philippi was in the north of Galilee, north of the Sea of Galilee where we were last Sunday. Why Jesus asked these question of the disciples then and there, we have no idea, but He asks two questions. "*Who do...*" (*Matthew 16:13*) This is not an unlikely question: Jesus is becoming well-known, certainly in this area, and there is a variety of theories about who He is; that variety is reflected in the disciples' answers: "*Some say...*" (*Matthew 16:14*) It is an easy-to-answer question; all they have to do is repeat what they have heard on the street. "This is what people are saying!" There is nothing demanding about it. But then comes the second question: "*But what...*" (*Matthew 16:15*) Wow! This is a quite different question; this is a more

demanding question. This is a question that requires not only insight and understanding, but it also requires allegiance and commitment to make an answer. All of a sudden this is about "What do I think? What do I believe?" It's personal!

Peter is the first to answer; is there an embarrassed silence? Is each one looking at the ground wondering what to say, hoping nobody's going to ask them? We've all been there, at times when we've been asked a tough question and the carpet has become very interesting as everyone's eyes go to the floor, so that we don't catch the eye of the person asking the question! Finally, Peter answers: "*You are...*" (*Matthew 16:16*) He has put his head above parapet and declares what he thinks. Jesus is the Messiah, the One sent by God into the world to bring the blessing of God to the people of God. He goes one step further to describe Jesus as the Son of God. The Messiah is about the job Jesus came to do; the Son of God is about who Jesus is. This is a big declaration and Jesus is pleased: "*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 16:17*) "Good answer, Peter; well done." The master is pleased with him for his answer and Peter is surely pleased too! God is at work. This is a big moment in his life as a disciple: he has been put on the spot, but has got it right; he is pleased because Jesus is pleased with him. It is a big declaration to make and in front of the other disciples too; there is leadership quality in Peter there in that moment.

How did Peter get to that place? What process was at work in Peter to bring him to that confession of faith? Jesus tells us that God revealed this to him and that somehow he would be the rock on which the Church was founded. But what was the process by which this was revealed? I don't think that we're talking a flash of light here, but more likely insight given and gained over time, perhaps. We've said before that the disciples were called to spend time with Jesus, watching Him, listening to Him. Peter has seen Jesus heal people who were sick, for example his own mother-in-law; he has seen Jesus feed 5000 people; he has seen Jesus walk on water. He has heard Jesus talk about forgiving people their sins and has heard Him teach about the kingdom of God and what life is like when God is King. Peter has taken all of that in and he might also know his Bible which tells him what the Messiah will be and do. He puts all of that together in his mind and when Jesus asks the question Peter is ready to say "*You are...*" (*Matthew 16:16*)

But then, matters take turn for worse and Peter puts his foot in it. Jesus takes the notion of Messiah and gives it a twist. The Messiah was to be a great King and God would bless Israel through the Messiah and bless the world through Israel. But Jesus talks about Messiah in terms of suffering and death, the cross. "*From that...*" (*Matthew 16:21*) Peter doesn't like that idea: "*Peter took...*" (*Matthew 16:22*) Peter contradicts Jesus! In no uncertain terms, Jesus tells Peter he is wrong: "*Jesus turned...*" (*Matthew 16:23*) From the big moment, the big declaration, Peter gets it so wrong; he is so clearly out of step with Jesus as to be embarrassing to himself and the whole group. For Jesus, His mission as the Messiah is centred on the cross; He will die on the cross in Jerusalem and it is necessary for Him to die on the cross; it is the very reason for His coming. Being a disciple has bearing the cross about it too! Peter has yet to learn all of that!

What do you believe about Jesus? How did you come to believe what you believe? I'm more interested today in the second question. There are all sorts of levels of understanding in churches and some will be convinced about certain things, while others will have questions and be in two minds about these same truths. How did we here? It began when someone told us the stories about Jesus, introduced us to these stories and something of these stories stayed with us. Maybe then we read some of these stories for ourselves and were intrigued by them; some of them we understood, some of them just didn't make sense. Then maybe we read other parts of the Bible,

commenting on the stories, taking the truth about Jesus further, deeper. We listened to other people expressing their faith, or asking questions. All through that process, the Spirit of God is at work giving us insight and understanding, so that now when I say "What do you believe about Jesus?" you have an answer that you can give.

That process goes on. The late William Still would be a man in his 70's, reading the Bible in Church, when he stopped and said "I've never noticed that before!" We are a work in progress; there are still new things to learn; there is still insight to be gained. "I couldn't do what Peter did!" we say, because we wouldn't know what to say. We don't know what to believe and there are so many voices telling us what to believe, some Christian, others not. Christian confidence is at a low ebb in Scotland today for this kind of reason; we don't know what to believe, what to say about Jesus. The remedy is easy to identify, but we just won't take it! Disciples are to spend time with Jesus; we do that by reading the Bible. How will we know what to believe about Jesus? By spending time with Him by reading the Bible, reading the stories of His exploits, reading the story of Easter. This is not reading for the sake of knowing knowledge, but this is reading to make our faith stronger, so that we are better able to live life by faith in Jesus, that we are better able to pray, better able to deal with hard things, and better able to take part in life of the church.

Those of us who are members of the Church, who have been through a confirmation process of some kind or another will have taken vows, declaring our faith in public. Our Church version of that is this: "Do you believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and do you confess Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?" It has two parts: firstly, we are asked to say that "this is what I believe about God, in my head"; then the second part says "this is my statement of allegiance, in my heart, my love for and loyalty to Jesus, my confession of faith". It is good for us to make that statement at times, but that is not end of the road; that is only the beginning of a voyage of discovery! We read story of Jesus walking on water - how do you react? "Oh yes! Jesus walked on water!" Should it not be "Wow! See what Jesus did! What a man! Who is this person?" This is a great voyage of discovery into the deeper things of God, Jesus, faith, life, the Bible, not to be done as a chore or a duty, but to be embarked on as a voyage of faith-discovery, a delight to see things not yet seen!

Here are some ideas as to how we might go about this:

- Set aside more times to read the Bible
- Learn a Bible verse every day - say it to yourself often.
- Meet with others at work over lunch or coffee to read the Bible
- Agree as a family to read the Bible together every day.
- Print out a verse and stick it on your computer where you see it often through day.

So this voyage of discovery will go on! Is it a bit scary? Perhaps. Is it exciting - definitely!