

MATTHEW 16:13-20
IDENTITY

Who are you? There is a whole industry built on that question! Genealogy is big business now as we try to trace our family history, an attempt to find out who we are. Have you taken the DNA test? You can now send your DNA away to discover what kind of people make up your identity – are you Viking, African or some other? You want to discover famous people in your family tree because that might make you feel good about yourself; instead you might discover a lot of poverty in your family tree and that might cause you a deal of angst – you’ve never met these people, but they are your family, so you feel connected and their pain becomes yours. You have grown up with one kind of identity, but then you discover something different and it challenges that identity and that sense of who you are. There was a ,an on TV lately who grew up in Glasgow and was taken to the Hebrides to be fostered and he was told that he was an only child and that was how he saw himself, his identity; he later discovered that had a number of brothers and sisters and that caused him a great deal of pain – his identity changed and he struggled to deal with that!

Churches have an identity. In Scotland, for hundreds of years our identity has been fixed. We are God’s people at the heart of our community and our society. Scotland has been shaped by the church in all sorts of ways: our culture, arts, music, our moral code and legal system, our education, but that’s not happening anymore and for some that challenges our whole sense of identity as church. We don’t matter anymore; we don’t count; what is our place in a changed and changing world. Today we’re thinking about shaping the future, but there are some who will suggest that the church has no future in Scotland; would the last one out put off lights in 30 years’ time! I don’t subscribe to that view – the church has a future; it will look different from the past and even the present, but the church will be here in Scotland for a long time yet. How do we rediscover our church identity so that we can shape that future?

“Look to...” (Isaiah 51:1f) Israel was in a similar place; the nation was facing exile, the loss of their freedom and they were frightened for their future. The prophet Isaiah tells them to begin to find hope by looking to the people from whom they had come, the rock from which they were cut, in their case Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was the great father of the nation; Sarah was the mother of Isaac; these were the people from whom they had come as a nation and the prophet’s idea is to inspire them into the future. Abraham and Sarah had conquered by faith; they had overcome the odds by their faith; they had trusted God even in hard times and had prevailed; “this is where you’ve come from; this is where to find hope and inspiration for the future!”

Can we as a church take inspiration from the past? What is rock from which we are cut? This is not a church history lesson but from the time Peter became the rock, the church has been full of people who have lived by faith, people whose stories can inspire us! There are people who have lived by faith at times when they were persecuted; or people who have lived by faith and travelled to the ends of the earth in mission to tell the story of Jesus to people who’ve not heard it before; there are people who have shaped Scotland to be the nation it is today because their faith mattered so much to them – the Reformers in this 500th anniversary of Martin Luther, people who have cared for the poor, people who have shaped education - all of them inspired by their Christian faith. As congregations, we can ask the same question: what is rock from which we are cut as a congregation? Who in the past life of this church has inspired you? Who is your model of Christian faith? The Vestry is full of photos of my predecessors; we might bring them out at some stage, but they need cleaning up! Some of you remember them and bits of their ministries because they were important in your growing up or in the forming of your faith. How can that inspire us to work and serve by faith in the future? *“Look to...” (Isaiah 51:1ff)*

Jesus is shaping the future, or at least preparing for the future, for the time when He will not be there anymore and the disciples are left on their own. Two things they need: first, a clear sense of who Jesus is; and second, a clear sense of who they are and their calling. We keep coming back to these two things because they matter so much; they shape us, they shape the church totally and unavoidably. They are necessary for the church; we cannot be church without a sense of who Jesus is and who we are as His disciples. As we try to shape the future for our congregation, we don't know what that looks like, but we have to be sure that we need a clear sense of who Jesus is and who we are in relation to Jesus.

"Who do...Who do..." (Matthew 16:13,15) It really is the same question twice over, but each time it is a very different question. The first time, Jesus is gleaning information – "what is the word on the street?" and we talked before about the options and there are probably even more – a prophet come back to life, John the Baptist come back to life. There are lots of answers about Jesus then and there still are lots of answers to that question about Jesus now and we would come back in much same way. He is a good man, a teacher, a moral leader. The second question looks for commitment, for a personal declaration of faith; "this is what I think!" and Peter is first to put his head up. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who was to come to save God's people and has some idea of a great King come to sweep away God's enemies and the enemies of the faith! Jesus says "amen" to Peter, but then moves the goalposts – "you want to understand me as Messiah, then that involves suffering and a cross; you can't understand me as Messiah without that!" We sang Horatius Bonar's great hymn celebrating Jesus the King and His glory and honour and son on, but there is a sting in the tail "Sing we the song of the Lamb that was slain, dying in weakness, but rising to reign." (Hy 441, v5) Florence plays it fantastically. Ultimately, King Jesus, the Messiah can only be understood by the cross, and weakness, and death.

This is who Jesus is. We can't lose sight of Jesus and who He is, otherwise we become another community group like any other. The Church is a community with Jesus at the centre, a community in relation with Jesus, and if we lose sight of that then we won't have a future and rightly so! Jesus who lived, who suffered, who died, who was raised and all for us so that we might be saved, who did all of this to change world and because He loved world – we need to keep hold of Jesus and that sense of who Jesus is and what He has done. That is the non-negotiable centre of the church, the rock from which we are cut; this is not to be given away, not to be forgotten!

"You are..." (Matthew 16:18) He had always been called Peter, we assume. "Simon Peter" he is often called! Jesus gives Peter a new sense of himself; "this is who you are and this is what I'm calling you to be!" Peter is called by Jesus to be the rock on which the new church will be built: *"On this..." (Matthew 16:18)* and for rest of his life that was Peter's job, to be the rock on which the church is built. It nearly fell apart when he denied Jesus, but after that, bold and full of faith, full of courage, Peter is there at the heart of the story of the new church, calling people to faith, being the centre of everything that God was doing at the start. Jesus gives Peter a clear sense of his calling; this is who Peter is called to be; this is what Peter is called to do.

Jesus knows your name! This is such an important psychology, that someone knows your name! Jesus knows your name and calls you by name to be part of His Church, to be part of the family of faith. That is who we are: I am Jim and that is how I've been called all my life; some people tried to call me Jimmy, but that's not me and I didn't warm to it. We are people who are named and Jesus knows these names and loves us by these names. "He knows that my name is..." – actually, you sang that pretty well today, but why, at other times, do we fall away in that part of song? Are we not sure of our names? Do we not like to brag or shout it out? It's who we are. Maybe you don't like your name!

What are you called to be? Now that's a hard question. People like me, ministers, preachers, they have a sense of calling from God and we want them to have that sense of calling;

otherwise why would they do the job? Actually, we all have a calling from Jesus: *"Follow me!"* is our calling. For Peter, that calling meant being the rock-man; for me it partly means being a preacher, your minister. What is that sense of calling for you? An elder, treasurer, property team member, choir member, organist, welcome team member, leader in Kids' Church, part of the Messy Church team, a teacher, a doctor, an accountant, a civil servant, a lawyer, a shop assistant, a care home worker, a parent, a spouse, a grand-parent, a sports-person, an office worker – all of these are callings from God, the people we can be in serving Jesus; some of these are in church, some are in the big, wide world, but all are callings from Jesus, this is who we are and this is what we are called to be or do. Do we have that sense of calling?

Shaping the future – a church with Jesus at the centre, a people who believe Jesus however falteringly; a church with people serving Jesus in all kinds of ways. This is how we shape the future. Remember the rock from which we were cut, and our past can inspire our future; church has been through hard times in the past, and exciting times; we may be in tough times for now, but I'm excited about the future and what we still are and what we can still be and what we can still achieve together. It will be together: this is not a one-person or even a two-person show; this is the church as family enjoying life together, being together, believing together, worshipping, praying, serving together. Let the Spirit shape us and our future and God will still build His church in our place, in our time. Be part of that future!