

## Who do you say that I am – Homily for Trinity XI

*Isaiah 51.1–6*

*Romans 12.1–8*

*Matthew 16.13–20*

*Who do you say that I am?*

Think of a friend, partner or family member looking you in the eye and asking this question. Or, a stranger. Or, even, a sworn enemy. Perhaps they don't use words, but cast a piercing look. It can cut us to the quick.

*Who do you say that I am?*

The question opens up an abyss. It brings before us not just another person's mystery but how we remain a mystery to ourselves – that sense in which there is something about being human that cannot be captured by facts or definitions, achievements or self-awareness, which can only be known through encounter and relationship.

*Who do you say that I am?*

Like a hidden treasure, at its core lies the issue of each person's unique dignity. Do we recognise the beauty of another person's mysterious worth, a beauty that can be almost too much to bear? Do we recognise in them our own worth, the way we share a common worth beyond all measure?

*Who do you say that I am?*

The question is demanding. It comes from the depths of our soul. And the only honest way to answer is with our whole being. It leaves both the one who asks it and the one who is asked exposed to each other. It brings into play issues of power between people.

We see the negative impact of this in those who measure their worth by diminishing others. They can be great only by making others small. Their motto is that of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.' This is the mindset of the tyrant and bully. It is terrifying when they ask: who do you say that I am. The only acceptable answer is one where their worth is lauded over ours. We see this played out with horrific consequences in politics. Those bent on power use any means to shore up their worth against others. The elimination of opposition. The censure of the press. The undermining of the rule of law and democratic processes. The disregard for truth. The blatant stoking up of bigotry. Of course, this also applies to our own lives. We all risk making our self-worth depend on belittling or harming others. On the flip side, we can internalise this attitude against ourselves. We can measure our worth by how we placate those who diminish us.

Nothing, nothing could be further from God's truth and purposes in relation to humankind. In today's Gospel, Jesus confronts his disciples, asking them, 'Who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replies

immediately: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' But does this not rehearse the problematic view I have just described? No. The difference is Jesus' response.

Jesus points beyond himself in two different directions. First, he does not claim any divine worth solely for himself. 'Flesh and blood,' he tells Peter, 'has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.' Jesus points to the divine life he shares with the Father in the Spirit. All that Jesus is, all who he is, he receives from and gives back to the Father. His divine worth is expressed by declaring the worth of the Father and all the Father shares with him in a life of love that celebrates the worth of every other.

In that spirit, in the second place, Jesus points back to Peter and says something remarkable: 'you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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.'

When Peter confesses who Jesus really is, Jesus surprises him by telling Peter who Peter really is. This is signified, firstly, by the new name Peter is given. He is no longer Simon but Peter. And, secondly, Peter's identity is now tied to the particular role Jesus gives him. Far from diminishing Peter, Jesus makes someone we know to be flawed share in his own divine mission. More strongly, Jesus makes God's

mission of salvation and so the divine worth itself dependant on the freedom and cooperation of fallible human beings. Jesus liberates us by divesting his authority to us. He trusts us. What we do on earth for the sake of others now carries the divine mandate of heaven. Far from affirming that a person's worth increases only when another's decreases, Jesus shows that the measure of true worth is the degree to which we live beyond ourselves and affirm others' worth.

*Who do you say that I am?*

To answer Jesus's question as Peter does, to confess Jesus as the Son of the loving God, carries its own sense of awe. For not only are we to respond to Jesus with our whole being but we must be ready for him to entrust to us his mission of redemption. This demands we change our lives. We must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to living for and with others. By definition this is not something we can do on our own but only together with others.

This is the foundation and mission of the church – the rock against which the dehumanising forces of Hades will not prevail. In the words of St Paul, belonging to the church, each person is called and empowered to be a living sacrifice, to live for the sake of building up others. This is to live out the full measure of faith, not to think highly of oneself, but to think highly of everyone within a shared existence where everyone is treasured. Here we who are many are one body in Christ, members of each other.

This lies at the heart of our baptismal identity where we are incorporated into the life Christ shares with the Father in the Spirit. In each baptism, the church bears witness to God's worth by affirming the value of each person. This is deepened in the Eucharist as each baptised person receives Christ's person, his body and blood, only alongside others in communion with them. At each Eucharist, Jesus makes himself vulnerable to us, puts himself in our hands, and asks us who do you say that I am? In his vulnerability, he calls out for our wholehearted response so that he can draw us into ever closer union with him and the Father in the Spirit for the sake of the salvation of the world.

*Who do you say that I am?*

We answer this in our baptism, by sharing Christ's body and blood, by making up the body of Christ through the living sacrifice of our own bodies and by building up the freedom and dignity of others so that, with them, we may show who we are in God and who God is in us. Who are we? We are those who bind the tyrannical forces in the world that would maim human dignity. We are those who loose people from servitude to tyrants, both external and internal. We are those who ally ourselves to all who seek to defend the voiceless, the oppressed, the destitute, and the common good. Who are we? We are followers of Christ, who pray to our Father, and live on earth as in heaven.