

Sermon
August 2020

Sunday 23

Lesson St Matthew 16: 13 – 20

Jesus travelled with His disciples to the territory of Caesarea Philippi. Situated in the northern part of Israel, this land was a gift from Emperor Augustus to his client king, Herod the Great, twenty years before Jesus was born. From Mount Hermon in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, the very soil was dedicated to the emperor god, Augustus. Across the land, Herod built three temples in honour of Caesar. It was in this place, where the atmosphere was stifled by the name of Augustus, that Jesus asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’

In reply, they answered, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’. In Scripture, details are seldom without significance. Why are *those* three names given? John the Baptist had been executed – beheaded – by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. When Antipas first heard reports of Jesus, he told his assembled court, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised

from the dead....’. It is striking that the Jewish leader, Herod Antipas, believed that John the Baptist had been resurrected. What of Elijah? In the Tanakh, our Old Testament, the prophet Elijah, believed to be the forerunner of the Jewish Messiah, ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot. He had not died. For some, Jesus of Nazareth was Elijah returned to Earth. The names John and Elijah suggested resurrection – life beyond this life – and the Messiah.

The disciples also said that some people believed Jesus was the prophet Jeremiah. The evangelist, Matthew, cited Jeremiah at the very beginning of the Gospel in the story of the flight to Egypt. Later, towards the end of the Gospel, Matthew again cited Jeremiah: this time it concerned the blood money of Judas. Jesus Himself quoted the prophet. As Jesus drove out the dealers and money-changers from the temple precincts, He told them:

Scripture says, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a bandits’ cave’.

Bandits' cave or 'den of thieves' is straight from the lips of Jeremiah. In our passage today, in His dialogue with Peter, Jesus said, 'You are Peter, the Rock; and on this rock I will build my church'. This echoed the prophecy of Jeremiah. The LORD promised to rebuild Israel. God said:

Virgin Israel, I shall build you up again,
and you will be rebuilt.

The explicit mention of John, Elijah and Jeremiah bring to the fore resurrection, new life and new beginnings.

Now we are ready to face the question which all followers of Jesus must surely face. Jesus asked Peter and the disciples, 'Who do you say I am?' There is more to this question than meets the eye. 'I am' is the name of God: it was the name given to Moses in his mystical vision at the burning bush.

Was this moment in Caesarea Philippi, under the shadow of Mount Hermon, a fleeting, mystical revelation for Peter – his burning bush moment? Perhaps for the first time, he 'saw' God in the face of Jesus. In his soul, he *felt* the words, the sheerest silence, 'I am'. As if in a trance, Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah; the Son of the Living God'.

In the Gospels, Jesus is variously referred to as Word, Light, Christ, Begotten Son, Lamb of God, Son of God, rabbi, king of Israel, Son of Man, and numerous others besides. Each title or description is a metaphor attempting to express the inexpressible. Jesus is the essence of the Eternal. With the eye of the soul, let Jesus stand before you, like He stood before Peter; in your heart, hear the unutterable name, 'I am'. In your spiritual practice, be still and aware of God's immediate Presence.

Our Gospel story records a life-changing moment for Peter. More than a revelation about Jesus, the story is intended as a revelation about who we are: you and me. The answer we offer reveals what Jesus means to us. Recently, I read the moving account of John Sutherland, who had been one of Britain's top police officers before he retired. In his book, *Blue*, he writes of his experiences on the frontline: from his first arrest outside Westminster Cathedral to pub stabbings, murders, domestic violence, mental illness and radicalisation. Known to his colleagues as JTB, John the Baptist, because of

his Anglican faith, Sutherland suffered a severe mental collapse which ended his frontline duties.

As a police officer, he described his work in almost biblical language:

When you strip away a lot of the noise and nonsense that is said about police officers, especially by politicians and certain journalists, you're left with a job that is to save lives and to find the lost, to bind up the broken-hearted and the broken-boned, to protect the vulnerable, defend the weak and confront the dangerous, to put yourself in harm's way in defence of complete strangers and sometimes to pay the greatest price of all.

For me, what is most moving about Sutherland's story is the inner struggle he faced for much of his life. Though in and out of churches from his youngest years, he said that he grew up with 'an awful lot of overwhelming guilt, that sense of never being good enough'. For years he thought, 'If there was a God, I had to earn his approval and his affection'. Sutherland's deep sense of personal failure was an aching pain from which, it seemed, he could not free himself. It was a factor in his breakdown. When he broke down, he missed church; he was physically, emotionally and spiritually unable

to attend. He said, 'I couldn't face it. I could barely say a prayer'.

Then something shifted. Sutherland said:

I remember lying quietly one day. What kept looping round in my brain was that line from the Psalms, 'Be still and know that I am God'. That was it. That one line. Here I was completely and utterly broken. I felt a failure in every respect with nothing to offer God.

And

I remember asking myself if that nothing was enough for him to love me?

And in some extraordinary way, both in that moment, and

over the weeks and months that followed, it became increasingly

apparent to me that the answer to that question was: Yes. That I am loved just as I am.

Lying quietly, in stillness, Sutherland's encounter with the Great I AM, with God, not only revealed the Divine present with him, but told him that God's love for him – for him – was real, unconditional, tender and unshakable. John Sutherland was raised to new life. The next time you say, 'I am', be aware that the name of your Eternal Lover is on your lips, a very present life-changing reality.

Amen.