

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 28th June 2015
Patronal Festival Mass

Who do you say I am?

There has been an increasing prevalence of 'office dog tags', those lanyards with identity cards attached. No doubt many of you wear them at work. Not long ago it was thought unusual to wear them. You could see those who had to use them whipping the lanyard over their heads and stuffing the cards into their pockets before anyone noticed as they left work. Now identity tags seem to be part of City fashion and everyone wears them. If you go for a meeting in town and are not a tag wearer getting into some places can be very tricky; even getting into Church House can be a bit of a palaver and the Lord protect you if you lose it whilst at your meeting.

Identity is defined as "the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group". The field of social psychology describes identity as being something formed in the context of significant others around us, recognising that identity relates to things like self-image, self-esteem and individuality. There are different types of identity: identity based on gender, social status, culture and personal philosophy or religion. If that doesn't add enough colour to our view of identity; identity can be defined in the context of time; what has passed, our history; what is happening, our present; what we look to, our future hopes and expectations.

In different cultures knowing someone's identity is seen as very powerful knowledge. In ancient Middle Eastern cultures power was associated with knowing someone's identity. In this view not only does knowing someone's identity help the outsider form an impression and define who they are perceived to be, it also gave power over the person named, in sharing your name or allowing someone to know your name gave them power over you. Giving a name was and still is seen as extremely important and can define the future of the person who is named. A very simple example would be the ability one has in gaining someone's attention by using their name. A seemingly innocuous example but extrapolate that into what can be done to affect that person if their name is known by a third person and it can become quite serious.

This is one reason why in the Hebrew tradition it is forbidden to use the name of God. To utter God's name would be to claim power over God. Something that could never be permitted. For when asked who God was by Moses, God replied "I am" stating the universal power held in God, recognising God is constantly in the here and now, yet without being able to take power over God.

Identity though isn't always to be hidden or protected. Some identities need to be shared and proclaimed if they are to have any value. In the gospel reading for today many identities are revealed, even changed.

Jesus asks the question, "Who do people say I am?" This is not a question born out of vanity. The gospel writer sees it as being very important at this stage of Jesus' ministry for the reader to be very clear about whom we are hearing.

There had been some confusion amongst Jesus' followers about who this Miracle Maker was. We know that from the answers he received. Yet it was Peter who declared, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus is declared, by his closest witness, not just to Jesus, not just to Jesus' followers but to anyone who reads or listens to this passage and hears God's word for them, Jesus is the Son of the Living God.

Peter's identity changes too. No longer a humble fisherman making his living catching and selling fish. Now he is to be the foundation of the Messiah's continuing ministry on earth; Peter the Rock, Petros in Greek; Shemayon Keppa in Aramaic; in Peter Christ's absolution and redemption is proclaimed. Peter has the Keys to the Kingdom of God — through him, through the ministrations of the church built upon this foundation is the healing forgiveness of God offered and administered.

The gospel message is not just about naming and identity. It is a dynamic shift in the life of Peter, and the followers of Jesus who will be the Church. Here the Church is born. In scripture we hear of Peter's continued ministry. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Peter leads the Church in preaching the Good News of salvation to the world (Acts 2.1-36). The power of Peter's teaching is first witnessed in the attempts to silence him by throwing him in prison and eventually, when that didn't work, by executing him. No longer was the world dealing with a humble fisherman from the shores of Lake Galilee. Peter had become a great teacher upon which the proclamation of salvation for the world was built.

As Peter's words and actions, as Jesus' identification and proclamation come to us through the ages in the pages of scripture and the personal witness of myriad of saints, of believers who have gone before us, as well as those who proclaim Jesus today, today we are challenged, both by Jesus' question, "who do you say I am?" and in how we identify ourselves in the world.

Today we celebrate our community, the Christian community of St Peters that has worshiped here for over a century. Our communities identity is defined by the Good News of Jesus which we share each time we gather around the altar and share in bread broken and wine out poured, blessed by God. For each generation we celebrate the question of identity which has been the same, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." and was changed. What you answer will change you.

The church, founded on Peter, is struggling in the Western world — it is not dead as some would like to think; it is ailing. When Peter preached he had eleven other friends with him, but he still proclaimed the love of God revealed in the person, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and he did so in the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming salvation for the world with courage and confidence. This legacy the Church has to reclaim, it must take back its identity and receive its name a fresh – the body of Christ — and it must do in courage and confidence. For us this proclamation of God's love for all people begins here in this celebration as we claim our identity as the Church, as the Body of Christ in this place. Jesus turns to you and asks, "Who do you say I am?" What on this great festival day, is your answer?