23rd August Sermon

Back in the 1980s I was striding down Victoria Street in London heading for the railway station on a sunny afternoon. Striding equally purposely in the opposite direction was a man in a bowler hat. As he approached he said, “Good afternoon, Mr Earney.” I was more than a little taken aback – I didn’t know him from Adam. I had been at a conference at Church House, Westminster. We had been issued with name badges in larger than usual lettering. I realised the man had mentioned my name as a kind of joke about the fact that I had forgotten to take off my badge before leaving the building. I quickly remedied my mistake and put the badge in my pocket. But by that point I had been identified and called by name.

Our two readings for today are about people being identified and named. The Gospel has two examples of this. Jesus asks the disciples about who the people identify him with and, Peter, speaking for the others, calls him the Christ, the Messiah. In return, Jesus makes a word play about the name Peter. Peter is identified by the writer of Matthew as the rock on which the Church would be founded. In our epistle reading, Paul, writing to the Christian community in Rome, identifies the characteristics of “the people of God” and calls on them to use the gifts they have been given.

Let’s look at these ‘identifications’ a little more closely. Before we do so we also have to note the name of the place where the gospel reading took place and how it is identified. Matthew tells us that the story took place at Caesarea Philippi, slightly more than twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It had been called Paneas, after the god Pan. The tetrarch Philip had rebuilt and renamed it, after himself to differentiate it from Caesarea on the coast. It had remained a pagan city and Jesus only went into “the district” and not to the city itself. We may surmise from this that after the hectic time of preaching and healing he withdrew to the pagan wilderness for ‘quiet time’ in which to teach the disciples. He needed to teach them about what lay ahead; about what was to happen to him and to them.

The account begins with him asking them about who he is. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They report four identifications –

* John the Baptist, who Herod had beheaded, returned from the dead
* Elijah, who the Jews expected to return before the final judgement – elsewhere in the gospel Matthew identifies John the Baptist with Elijah (chapter 17, verses 10-13)
* Jeremiah, Matthew is the only evangelist to include him in the list
* One of the Prophets

All four of these popular views identify Jesus as a prophet, a stirring, fearless spokesman for God.

Then Jesus turns the question on them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replies on behalf of the disciples, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In some translations the term ‘Christ’ is used instead of ‘Messiah’. This is not unexpected as both refer to the one who is God’s anointed. Matthew is the only evangelist to add the words “the Son of the living God”. This may be to emphasise his divinity because the term ‘Messiah’ was usually thought to mean a human person called out to be a charismatic leader of Israel.

At this point Jesus turns the spotlight on to Peter. In words only recorded by Matthew he declares that this insight has not come from human understanding but by a gift from God. As a result of Peter’s faithful declaration, in Matthew’s account, Jesus enters into the wordplay of which we spoke earlier. Peter, in Greek, Petros, means rock – as does Cephas in Aramaic. Jesus reminds them that both Peter and Cephas have been used earlier as names. He calls this disciple, Cephas, Petros, Rock and says that he will build his church on this Petra. That is the feminine use of the word, literally meaning ‘a ledge of rock’. In the whole of this extra passage in Matthew, the author emphasises the trustworthiness of Peter as leader in the early church. The reference to keys underlines this – a master gives his servant the keys to his house in solemn trust. Thus, Peter is identified as leader within the disciples, and, by inference, the early church.

In a similar way, St Paul calls out, names and identifies those to whom he is writing in Rome as his “brothers and sisters by the mercies of God”. Those who are “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”. As he does in other writings, he uses the body as a metaphor to describe the church, the congregation or assembly of the people of God. Not all parts of the body are the same, each part has its own function and purpose. So too with the church, not all the members are the same, not all have the same insights, not all have been granted the same gifts. But we come together as the one body of Christ. Although he does not say so explicitly, Paul infers that each member should be content with the gift they have been given and exercise it diligently and faithfully. They should not be hankering after gifts which belong to others.

So how does all this impinge on us two millennia later. Perhaps we should take heart that God continues to call us out to be his people, his church, in our time. Perhaps we should praise God in not being afraid to be identified as his people. That by the words we use and the way we live our lives we can be seen to be his people. Perhaps we should look again at the gifts he has given us to try to ensure that we are using them as fully as we can.

St Paul, in his list of gifts of the Spirit, includes the gift of exhortation. In that spirit I exhort you to be proud, in the best sense of that word, that you are the people of God.

Rev’d Graham Earney