



**Sermon preached by the Reverend Ann Mazur on 11th
Sunday after Trinity**

Matthew 16.13-20

'Who do you say that I am?' is probably one of the most important questions in the gospels. In today's gospel the question was put to the disciples. Today it is being put to us.

Jesus begins with a general question, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' The disciples are quick with their answer to this question. After all this is a safe question requiring no personal involvement? The haunting memory of John the Baptist, the passionate preaching of Jeremiah, the legendary expectation of Elijah all hang in the air.

Then comes Jesus' direct question; 'But who do *you* say that I am?' In the boat after the storm the disciples had paid homage to him and confessed him as the Son of God. Here all the confessional attention is fixed on Peter. He confesses more than he fully understands.

Peter replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

These verses are among some of the most studied, debated, and disputed verses in the New Testament. Historically, they have been central to issues of authority in the church, especially of the authority of the episcopacy and of the Bishop of Rome. But as important as this hardy perennial of a theological conundrum is, it isn't the issue that seems the most important to talk about today.

Instead, let's consider what this story says about Peter, and about us.

It all begins when Peter becomes the first person to make the great Christian confession of faith. He names Jesus as the Messiah, the hope of Israel, the son of the one who created heaven and earth.

Notice the very first thing that happens—Simon is given a new name.

And "Peter" really is a *new* name—there is absolutely no record of anyone using Petros, the Greek word that means "rock," or "Cephas," the same word in Aramaic, as a proper name before this event.

Names and naming were very important in the Hebrew mind—a name was the summary of the existence of the thing named. To change a person's name—as God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Jacob's name to Israel—was to alter fundamentally that person's identity, relationships, and mission. To give a person his or her name was, in some way, to shape their destiny.

It still works that way: to confess Jesus as the Christ is to be changed, it is to be given, by him a new distinct identity and mission in relationship to him. That was acted out visibly with Peter and it continues to be true among us.

And part of our name, part of the identity we receive from the Lord, is the same as Peter's. He is the first rock of the edifice the Lord is building. That structure is the church. Peter is the first stone of a building, the first called for the new Israel, the first named for a great task. Upon him and the other Apostles, upon their faith and upon their person, Christ builds his church.

And so the Lord continues to build it and we are part of this. We continue to be called to be who Peter was called to be. Through us, and by us, Christ continues to build his church. Through us, Christ continues to be present to his world. And today with all the uncertainty and pressures that the world faces it is vitally important that we show Christ to the world.

This church that the Lord began with Peter, and that we are a part of, is a holy and a sacred thing. It is not merely a voluntary association of like-minded people; it is not primarily or at its heart a human institution. It is instead a divine mystery, a holy thing, much greater than we can see or imagine, stronger even than death itself, vast in space and time.

It is built of stones, or rocks, human stones, human rocks; and these stones are laid one on top of the other. They touch, so the building is a single structure that continues through space and time. That continuity is a continuity of Christ's presence, a continuity of faith, of tradition and doctrine, and a continuity of persons, each connected to those who went before.

That continuity is important. We call it apostolic. It is one of the four marks of the church—in the Nicene Creed we say that the church is - one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This continuity of doctrine, faith, and persons is the apostolic part.

It is one important way we are connected to the Apostles and the early church. But it also means that the rocks are laid one on top of the other. Each new name, each new rock, each new person, builds on something unbroken and continuous.

There is a wonderful image for this. If we imagine all of the last 20 centuries as rings of time, as concentric circles of time, scores and scores of such circles and we are in the very outermost circle, farthest away from the centre—and at the centre is the Cross.

We are brought into the circle, into the faith, in large part because somewhere, somehow, someone in the circle just before ours took us by the hand and said, "come," and so drew us in. That is one very important reason why we are here. That person was able to do this for us because someone had taken him or her by the hand and had drawn that person in.

And so on, through all the centuries, hands are held through all of those circles. Until we reach the place where a very few of those hands were held by hands touched by the mark of nails. So we hold hands touched by nails.

In this way, Christ builds his church; such is the gift we have been given.

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," Peter answers. This is more than just an answer. With those words Peter has re-centered his life. Christ is the axis around which Peter will present his body "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

Those were wonderful words that we heard in our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

Jesus called Peter, the most human of all the disciples for he was the one of little faith sinking in the water. He argued with Jesus and ended up being called Satan. He fell asleep when he was supposed to be praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and he denied knowing Jesus.

Through it all he was being shaped, formed, moulded into the rock Jesus knew him to be.

With all its frailties Jesus chooses human life and relationships to be the rock on which he builds his church. We are not, however, rocks that are unmovable or unchangeable. As water slowly forms and shapes a rock over time, so does a lifetime help to form and shape us to be Christ's foundation in this world.

We are called to offer our bodies, our lives, to be transformed, to be centered on Christ so that we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We are all part of the church, we are one body in Christ. Words we say at each Eucharist at the breaking of the bread.

We are members of one body and we all have various gifts to be used in the building up of the church. Christ will mould us to be the disciples he wants us to be, to use the gifts that he has given us.

Jesus asks us 'Who do you say I am?'

Who we say Jesus is, has everything to do with who we are and who we will be. In some ways our answer says as much or more about us than Jesus. It reveals how we live and what we stand up for. It guides our decisions, and determines the actions we take and the words we speak.

It describes the expectations and demands we place on Jesus. It discloses the depth of our motivation for and commitment to following him, a motivation and commitment that will be challenged by next week's gospel in which Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him.

Christ's church can be built on no other foundation, with no other living stones than those he names, and with no other cornerstone and chief builder than Christ himself.

We constantly re-live this Gospel story. As we say to Jesus, "you are the Christ," he says to us—to each one of us—"you, too, are a rock, and with you, also, I am building my church." What happened to Peter continues and it includes us.

'Who do you say that I am?'

In today's gospel the question was put to the disciples. Today it is being put to us. There is nothing safe about the question Jesus poses. How could there be? There is nothing safe about Jesus or the life to which we call us.

Yet Jesus asks us 'Who do you say that I am?' Amen.