

## Be transformed

*Exodus 1:8-2:10; Ps. 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20*

Two of the readings for this Sunday, the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost confront us with messages that are vital to our Christian lives.

It is not the Old Testament passage relating the birth of Moses, although this is a remarkable story. I particularly like the two gutsy Hebrew midwives who choose to do what is right in God's eyes, and so help to "bring to birth" God's saving action in freeing His people from slavery through His servant Moses.

Nor am I speaking of Psalm 124, although that psalm is a marvelous model of witness for the Christian. It does not argue, explain, deny or apologise but robustly declares and testifies to God's help in the form of a song. *The snare is broken, and we have gone free.* What a great description of the human condition and the saving work of Christ! Snared by sin, and set freed by Christ's redeeming sacrifice on the cross. We can confidently declare with the psalmist that, no matter what our personal circumstances, our *help is in the name of the Lord.*

However, it is the other readings for today that interest me. Someone once observed that Matthew Chapter 16 is the most misunderstood chapter of the Bible. And someone else has remarked that Romans Chapter 12 is the most neglected and ignored chapter of the New Testament. So there we have it, the most misunderstood and the most neglected have come together in our Sunday Bible passages!

Our Sunday readings at this time of the year are core texts, seeking to open us up to what it means to live a life with God. Both of today's readings get to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, and both readings ask questions that are fundamental and central to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is easy enough to discover the question asked in the gospel, for Jesus himself asks it directly. He begins by asking His disciples *Who do people say that the*

*Son of Man is?* The answers are varied: some said that he was John the Baptist. Apparently King Herod was not the only person so awe struck by John's blazing personality and fiery message that he believed him to have risen from the dead.

Others saw Jesus as Elijah, in other words as the greatest of the prophets of old, and as the forerunner of the Messiah. Some opted for Jeremiah, which might seem to us like a strange choice, but many legends had grown up around Jeremiah and like Elijah, and indeed Isaiah, he was also seen as a forerunner of the expected Messiah.

Then Jesus asks THE question *But who do you say that I am?* Was there a moment's silence as the disciples took in the question, or did Peter burst in impetuously as he so often did? Whatever happened, for once Peter had really grasped who Jesus was, and he answers *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

This is the question that Jesus asks us and asks everyone through the ages. *But who do you say that I am?* It is never enough to know *about* Jesus, we must answer the question on a personal level. And it is a highly dangerous question to answer, because if we answer as Peter did, our lives will never be the same, and we will no longer belong to ourselves, but to God. That is a momentous and wonderful, but also a life-changing experience.

Many people refuse to hear the question, because to answer it honestly will change them and their lives forever. We can get away with not answering, if we want to, because Jesus in His life and teaching urges, invites, persuades and questions, but He never coerces. It can certainly be more comfortable for some not to respond.

Some people answer the question: *But who do you say that I am?* like many of the Jews of Jesus' time did. Jesus is a good man, a holy man, a great man, perhaps the greatest man in history, but still a man. We don't have to change if we answer

the question this way, after all, what claim can a long-ago prophet or sage, however great, have on our lives today?

But if you believe and answer with Peter: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*, you are changed utterly forever. This is where the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans fits in. For although he does not phrase his words in the form of a question, St Paul is asking: *To whom do you belong?*

*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

(Rom. 12: 1-2)

In the catechism of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which used to be used in preparation for confirmation, the candidates agreed *to renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh*. These days most of us are well aware of the lusts of the flesh, and we have been warned about the wiles of the devil, but many people are not so sure when it comes to the world.

The church and the Christian are different from the world in which they live. Our very minds and attitudes must be different. Paul speaks of this again in the first letter to the Corinthians:

*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.*

(1 Cor. 2:12).

Our very power to witness lies in being different. Deep down the human heart knows its need to be changed, and when religion is presented offering life without change, the seeking heart, quite rightly, does not take it seriously.

The New Testament teachers and writers constantly call us to follow Christ and to turn our back on the world. Not the created world of nature, for that is the gift of God, and is charged with His glory. The world we are called to leave behind is the world of human society steeped in unbelief, impenitence, Godlessness and greed. Whatever promotes self, cheapens life, starves the soul, adopts current moral values and follows the majority – be they right or wrong – that is the world!

Saint Paul goes on to make another important point that is not much heeded today:

*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ...we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly:*

(Rom. 12:4-6)

Today when uniformity and standardization of thought and behaviour are such powerful forces, even in education and religion, Saint Paul is saying that all people are not alike. Thank God, in the spiritual life we may rejoice in our diverse gifts. *As star differs from star in glory, so the children of God are different from one another. They are alike in being members of Christ's Body, but as different as bodily members must of necessity be.*

Are we stuck in the old ways, “conformed to this world” with its alien and anti-Christian values and ideas, with a powerful allure and attraction backed up by money and advertising and materialism? Those who conform to this world are, as Saint Ambrose once said, even worse off than the demons, because the demons at least know about spiritual matters, but anyone absorbed in this world's trivialities is unable to know divine matters.

Or are we breaking through to life's greatest and deepest and most important mystery? Are we, by the mercy of God offering ourselves to him, allowing

ourselves to be transformed, however painfully and however slowly, so that we can truly know what is *good and acceptable and perfect* for our lives?

It takes humility and perseverance if we are to carry Christ's work of reconciliation to the world, but Saint Paul reminds us that being a disciple of Jesus Christ does not mean becoming a carbon copy of someone else or something else, but exercising the unique gifts we have been given in our own unique ways. Not everyone has to follow Jesus in the same way as others. The important thing is acknowledging Him as Lord and Saviour and belonging to Him. It is God Himself, as Saint Paul says, who equips us for service.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, during the coming week I invite you to reflect on these two questions: *But who do you say that I am?* and "To whom do you belong?" Who is Jesus to you?

If He is *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, what should this mean for our lives? To whom do we belong? If the answer is God, are our minds being transformed? Or are we conformists at heart, content to stay as we are, letting the ripple pass us by and missing the chance to catch the wave and ride forward with God?

For the one who asks *is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ... He is also head of the body, the church, and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.*

(Colossians 1:15, 18-19)

To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.