

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023; Trinity 12; Benefice HC  
Ampleforth

I recall growing up often watching what was referred to as ‘sand and sandal, epic Biblical films, made in the 1960’s; *‘King of Kings’*, and *‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’* come to mind, particularly the latter as I seem to recall John Wayne played the Centurion at the Cross!

When I thought about the Gospel text today, I was reminded that here we have what I like to refer to as, ‘the ‘greatest question ever asked’, Jesus saying to his disciples the double question, firstly, ‘Who do the people say I am?’, then, ‘Who do you say I am?’

We are told that this event took place outside of the city Caesarea Philippi, named after the Roman Emperor Tiberius and the son of Herod, Philip. The city was a great centre of pagan worship outside of which was a cave which, according to tradition, the Greeks named ‘the gates of Hades’ as it was thought to be the entrance to the underworld. So it was in this district, perhaps on one of the several peaks overlooking the gates of Hades that Jesus shared this most searching and revealing question. This too echoes our situations today as we look upon our confused and broken world amid which Jesus asks us too, that same question, which demands an answer.

Again, as last week, we are reminded in the double question of Jesus of the ‘I AM’, the Holy Name of God appears. He is in effect asking in this place of numerous gods and deities, ‘Do the people say I am God?’, and ‘Do you think I am God?’. Again, very reminiscent of our world today.

This question has reverberated down the centuries and it is how it is answered that decides the outcome of all things. From that day to this, those who have heard about Jesus

have been faced with the same question and the answer they give determines the course of their lives. Some ignore it, some evade it, many reject it - what is unavoidable is that it demands an answer.

Indeed, the question is even more resonant if we embrace not only what it is to or “say” an answer verbally, but also what it reveals about the lives we lead in the light of our declared faith. Our actions are just as critical as that which we confess with words, if not more so, in demonstrating and practising what we proclaim. Therefore, as we answer this life-altering question, the shape and actions of our lives are as important as the words of our lips, and from there, where we are prepared to go, as St Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” he says.

Because the Gospel writers are not just interested in correctly defining who Jesus is and ending things there, but also in shaping an active community moulded in the light of his actions and teachings. So, this double question is not just a matter of defining his identity but of formation, not just expressing a doctrine but nurturing discipleship, not just a personal statement, but creating the church community.

In short, for Matthew, your identity is not only just about who you say Jesus is, but about becoming aware of who is also around you, who is accompanying you on the journey. What we therefore confess with our hearts and lives in answering the question of Jesus on a personal level, then becomes who we are as part of the believing community, as Jesus proclaims to Peter, and unto whom he bestows his role as the rock on which the church shall be built.

As Peter and all believers from that day to this have realised to answer the question is just the beginning. Our

response can't just be, "I am saved, I have found Jesus, have you?" and leave it at that.

For us all, there is a price to pay, but one that as its return has inexpressible joy, as we are called to follow in service, faith and love all the rest of our days.

Thanks be to God, Amen.