

Sunday 23rd August

Sermon by Reverend Peter Lyth

A prayer of adoration and thanksgiving

Lord God, we come before you in humble adoration.

How blessed are we that the one who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven is the one who has the key to our hearts.

Thank you, God, for the privilege of being part of the amazing story of faith that sustained our ancestors.

Thank you, God, that we know our future is safe with you.

Amen.

Read Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon

I'm Going to start this sermon with a quiz. Here are some ordinary (at least for the most part) names. Each of these changed their name to something more famous. Can you guess who they are?

- 1) Lesley Hornby
- 2) Harry Roger Webb
- 3) Anna Mae Bullock
- 4) Reginald Kenneth Dwight
- 5) David Robert Hayward-Jones
- 6) Marion Robert Morrison
- 7) Maurice Joseph Micklewhite
- 8) Richard Walter Jenkins
- 9) Frances Ethel Gumm

All these are very unassuming names – so much so, that they thought that keeping it would hold them back in their chosen profession. They probably have a point. It's hard to drum up enthusiasm for a billboard with Norma Jean Mortensen Baker, but change it to Marilyn Monroe and things change considerably.

Names are very important. The outgoing General Secretary of the URC, John Proctor, had the rare gift of remembering names of people, even if he had only met them once. It reinforced the impression that he cared for folk.

Names are often chosen to convey something about the owner. You can buy books of babies names that tell you that Neil, for instance is Celtic and in the Gaelic: “Champion or cloud; and apparently A dynasty of Irish kings was founded by Niall of the Nine Hostages”. Helen, means “bright” and is also the Greek’s name for their country Hellas.

In the Bible, there are many names that convey meaning. For example, *Jacob* means *he grasps the heel*, a Hebrew idiom for *he deceives*. It was alleged that he was born holding the heel of his twin brother Esau and his subsequent life made the name “he deceives” very appropriate.

We are told at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel that the name Jesus, the Greek form of Joshua means “the Lord saves”. So naming is very important.

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The way that the question is asked is loaded. Jesus refers to himself as “the son of man”, a term that he uses a lot. There has been considerable debate over the significance of this name. Some consider it an elaborate way of saying “I”. But, in the book of Daniel, this term takes on a new significance, a towering figure that is more divine than human, representing the people of God but also identifying with the suffering servant described by Isaiah. Such a being would ultimately be, “sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” As described by Matthew in chapter 26.

The disciples respond in a number of ways, all indicating different, but ultimately incomplete understandings of the nature of their master. John the Baptist was a prophet that was in recent memory for many of them, others had suggested prophets of a more formative age of Israel’s history. Elijah was regarded by many as the definitive prophet and Jeremiah spoke to the nation at a time of crisis (the Exile) not dissimilar to the situation that they now found themselves in. These are all figures of stature – men of God. As prophets, they spoke God’s words but, at the end of the day the image is insufficient to describe Jesus’ significance. Jesus then homes in as he asks, “who do you say that I am?”. These are the people that have travelled with Jesus. They have heard his teaching, they have seen the miracles. They were there when Jesus challenged the religious authorities. They are more likely to have the big picture.

Without hesitation, Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God”. This is Jesus’ true identity. So Jesus might be a prophet, but he is really much more than that.

Now if we left it there, it would be fine, but it would not be the full story. We need to look at the context. The first thing is where this happened. It took place in Caesarea Philippi, a city rebuilt by Herod Philip, named in homage to the Roman emperor whose patronage he enjoyed. It lay 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. There was a grotto under the

mountain there that was reputedly the birthplace of the god Pan, the god of nature. There were many other temples to pagan gods, but dominating the city was a new temple, huge and built of white marble, dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor. Against this backdrop of worship of various gods, Peter's declaration takes on a new significance. There may be all these temples all with different gods, but here is Jesus, the son of the one true living God.

The second thing is what the word Messiah actually means – it's a word that we bandy around quite a bit. The word, which is interchangeable with Christ, means "anointed one". In those days, there were three kinds of people who could be anointed, prophets, priests and kings. In declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, Peter was saying that Jesus was all three. Like the priest, he connected people with God, like the prophet, he spoke the words of God and showed the people what God was like. As a king, he exercised God's rule over God's people whilst at the same time being the servant of the Lord. This insight is so much more than the ideas that the people had into who Jesus was (and is).

Thirdly, Peter is the first person to reveal Jesus fully for who he is. Judaism had been waiting longingly for a Messiah to bring them freedom. But in this moment Peter has the insight that this figure – which to many would have seemed unlikely – is the one for which they had been waiting. But Jesus underlines this by following up Peter's declaration with, "for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven". Here is indeed the Saviour.

So, in this man, named at birth, "the Lord saves", is now also named the "Messiah" or "Anointed one". Amongst all the surrounding tributes to pagan deities, Peter declares that it is he who is the saviour of humankind.

Amongst the distractions of modern life, the false gods of money, fame and status, the question still stands – who do we say Jesus is? And the answer is still the same as that which Peter said - "He is the Messiah, the son of the Living God". His is the name above all names – Jesus Christ.

Amen

And now the answers to the quiz:

- 1) Twiggy – Lesley Hornby
- 2) Sir Cliff Richard – Harry Roger Webb
- 3) Tina Turner – Anna Mae Bullock
- 4) Sir Elton Hercules John – Reginald Kenneth Dwight

- 5) David Bowie – David Robert Hayward-Jones
- 6) John Wayne – Marion Robert Morrison
- 7) Michael Caine – Maurice Joseph Micklewhite
- 8) Richard Burton – Richard Walter Jenkins
- 9) Judy Garland – Frances Ethel Gumm

Prayers of intercession

We pray for people who struggle with their faith:
through self-doubt,
through difficult circumstances,
through bad things happening,
through being led astray,
by wanting fame and fortune.

We pray for people who feel in the dark,
locked in a situation where they can find no answer,
that they might come to understand
that you are the key to everything they need.

We pray for ourselves:
when we are in difficult situations,
when we try to unlock doors that aren't ours to unlock,
when we don't focus on the kingdom,
when we don't share our story.

We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.
Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory.
Your will be done, O Lord.

Amen

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