

## Romans 12:1-8 and Matthew 16:13-20

### I believe in the living God, Jesus, the Messiah... We are, the one holy and apostolic Church

As a nation we've just concluded the annual event that is the season of exam results, with the GCSE results being issued last Thursday. The exams this year have been touted as the hardest for a while, with new curricula in Maths and English. Students preparing for these exams would have had to learn a lot of things by rote to get just the lowest or foundation grades, like tediously doing all the steps in a maths calculation to ensure that even if the final answer is incorrect some marks might be scraped for the "workings".

But the higher grades would only have been accessible to those who went above and beyond such basics, and learnt to apply these fundamentals to new situations; to be creative, to think outside the box. It's all very well learning by rote a bunch of physics equations, but it requires a bit more thinking to use these to calculate the gravitational potential energy of one of my pears, to its kinetic energy as it falls out of the tree!

Such equations have been thought and puzzled over for centuries. Many people look at them, learn them, regurgitate them for the exam and afterwards forget them as being of no understandable use for their future lives. A few folk take these equations and use them to build satellites to land on asteroids, photograph planets, predict an eclipse and ensure that we can talk to Uncle Bob in New Zealand.

And this is where our readings come in. In our Gospel this morning, Jesus asked the disciples who other people think he is; and based on what they know through listening to the people that have been gathering around Jesus, and have learnt from scripture in the past, they offer a variety of answers. The local rabbis would have been proud - their scripture classes had born fruit!

But then Jesus asks a more difficult, challenging question, "who do **you** say that I am?" You can almost hear the shuffled feet, the hesitant scribbling, and then rubbing out, of a pencilled, potential answers; and the despairing cries of 'we weren't expecting that question' and 'you haven't taught us that!'

Simon, class swot that he tries to be, offers an answer. It is an answer based partially on what he's been taught by, and witnessed of, Jesus. It is an answer that shows he is **applying** what he's learnt, both from the rabbinic teaching of his community AND his current experiences, to the question. It is an intuitive answer, inspired by the Spirit of God working in and through him: "you are the Messiah, [he says to Jesus], the son of the **living** God." Simon has thought for himself, and come up with an answer.

Simon isn't always right, as we will discover next week. But this time he is, and the fact that he has come up with the answer in the way that he has, is as important as the answer itself. In fact the two are linked: unless there was a living God, Simon could not have been inspired to give the answer he did! Unless he had personally encountered and lived with Jesus, seeing the Messiah's miracles and teaching for himself, he could not have applied that to the Jewish teaching provided by his upbringing and culture, and given the answer he did.

How we identify Jesus should be based on our personal encounters with God, even though it is informed by our continual reading and re-reading of scripture and by reasoned dialogue with others. Who we say Jesus is, should be grounded in a conversation with God whereby we adjust what we think we know as we experience more and more of him. Our church, our ministers, our Sunday or school teachers and others will have their opinions, but in the end we have to decide for ourselves in conversation with God, what it is in the person of Jesus that inspires us to love him. And then we have to tell him that we do.

God has created, and knows each of us as individuals. He is the potter and we are the clay (Isaiah 64:8). We are the work of his hands, (Jeremiah 1:4-5). He expects us to be able to respond to him in a way that is individual to us, and not simply repeat by rote a stock answer, creed or prayer. We have to step out from those around us, and if necessary look like we want to be the class swot, and say 'This is what I believe...' and be prepared for that answer to be temporary, provisional and developed further as we learn more.

Because when we stand up as someone who knows themselves to be loved by God, and declare our faith in Jesus as the living God, the chances are that it's at that point that the importance of the individual stops, and the importance of community starts. Just as Simon discovered.

Simon. Simon Peter. Peter, the name meaning rock on which the Church was built. We know that, we've been taught that. Yet in a play on words hidden in the Hebrew, the word rock is also related to the church - it's to do with the fact that 'rock' and 'church' are written in the feminine form. The community of Christians we know as church is also meant to be rock-like, to stand firm for the principles of love, grace, forgiveness and justice that Jesus taught, both spiritually and visibly, in heaven and on earth. It is,... **we are**... the body of Christ, made up of the many parts and callings outlined in the passage we heard in Romans.

We should be a body that exemplifies the individuality of our grace-filled relationship with Jesus. But we are called to serve, teach, comfort, encourage, give, prophesy, to each other, and to the world, all with single-minded, God-focused, energetic, cheerfulness,... together. Collaboratively and corporately, linked by the joints and tendons of our shared faith and willingness to make sacrifices, Christ-like sacrifices.

The era when we couldn't tell anyone of our faith in Jesus is long gone. The reason for that was down to the timing of Jesus mission and the politics of the time. It should have stopped at the resurrection, and it certainly stopped at Pentecost. We have a personal and living faith, in a living God, Jesus Christ the Messiah, who, through the power of the Holy Spirit gifts us to be the church, the body of Christ.

So the questions this morning, and in the months to come as you pray, study and work with a new vicar, are tough, challenging ones:

To what extent is St. Mary's as a church, trying to pass an exam at a foundation level, based on facts you've been taught in the past, the standard principles and calculations of how things have always been done?

And, to what extent is St. Mary's living as a church of grace-filled, individually called and inspired Christians ready to use it's Spirit-filled intuition, cheerfully and energetically to proclaim our faith in Jesus, to teach and inspire people who've not encountered Jesus, to serve the community, to comfort those in pain and grief, and to prophesy hope, forgiveness and resurrection, together as the body of Christ?

I'm going to ask you to do something different now. We **are** going to say the creed, to proclaim our faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the living God. We **are** going to do that together as the church, the body of Christ, the sum of many parts. But we are, for the majority of it, going to say "**I**" and "**my**" rather than "we" and "our". So each paragraph will start I, until we get to the line "we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church". In doing so I hope it will encourage each of us in our own individual encounters with and faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and remind us that we are called to be one holy catholic and apostolic church, living out our faith together, in the name of Jesus the living God, and for the sake of the life of the world to come.

Please stand:

**I** believe, in one God,  
The Father, the Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

**I** believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
The only Son of God,  
Eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
Begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father;  
Through him all things were made.  
For **me**, and for **my** salvation he came down from heaven,  
Was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
And was made man.  
For **my** sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

**I** believe in the Holy Spirit,  
The Lord, the giver of life,  
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,  
Who has spoken through the prophets.

**We** believe in **and are**, one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
And the life of the world to come.  
Amen.