**27th August 2017
Matthew 16.13-20
 Who is Jesus?**

*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen*.

Over the summer we spent a day or two in Chichester and we loved looking around its splendid and lively cathedral. One of the things that struck me was just how good the staff had been in trying to explain the faith for visitors and here’s what one of the information boards said in a side aisle:

*This church is built in the shape of a cross.

Christians believe that we see God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed God’s kingdom of justice, peace and love for all. Some people were so threatened that he was crucified. Christians believe that God raised Jesus to new life and that he invites everyone to share that new life for ever. Responding to that invitation is what the Christian journey is about.*

Well I thought that was pretty good and said an enormous amount in very few words! It’s the sort of statement we could spend hours discussing and unpacking.

Our Gospel reading this morning asks the question the Chichester statement was trying to answer: Who is Jesus and what do we make of him?

Peter comes up with the answer: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Sometimes we jump on this statement and view it as a turning point in the story of Jesus.

Yet the truth is there wasn’t just one understanding of the idea of Messiah at that time. Peter calls Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. Yet that could have meant so many things rather than just a single viewpoint universally held.

Kings and prophets were called Messiah. Ordinary people who seemed to have a special gifting from God were even called Messiah. Preachers like John the Baptist were even viewed as Messiahic.

So whilst it’s obvious that Peter has some insight into Jesus’ identity, after all Jesus compliments him on his perception, it’s by no means clear exactly what Peter means when he calls Jesus *The Christ*.

We can all use the same words, even titles, yet fill them with a variety of meanings. At one Passover in our church hall, actually I think it was the first I attended, the visiting Rabbi occasionally spoke of Jesus. He did so with respect but I knew that he and I wouldn’t quite see eye to eye as to who Jesus was – maybe that’s why whenever he said his name, he looked over at me, smiled and winked!

The question remains an important one for us today: Who is Jesus?

Over the passing years Jesus has become many things. We’ve almost certainly cut him free from his Jewish roots and that’s a disaster. We’ve probably given him a certain understanding of perfection that doesn’t really respect his humanity – how else could we sing the Christmas carol: Away in a Manger, with that intriguing, and some might say ‘debatable’ line: The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes – really?

So perhaps we need to do some serious thinking about this question: Who is Jesus? And maybe we could surprise ourselves with some fresh understandings and appreciation of him.

In my first church I worked under a minister with one of the finest minds I’ve ever known – well, he was Scottish and educated at New College, Edinburgh so what else would you expect!

Yet Donald’s favourite hymn is one of the simplest in the book: Fairest Lord Jesus. It’s a poem about Jesus – it’s a song of admiration for his life and ministry – it’s a psalm of appreciation for all that Jesus can teach us about God.

It’s an important question – so how would you answer it: Who is Jesus?

Both Matthew and Mark include Peter’s declaration in their gospels. It’s made at Caesarea Philippi – a place that speaks volumes about status and power because its very name references both Imperial Rome, Caesar and the local Monarchy, Herod’s son Philip.

Caesarea Philippi was perhaps an appropriate place to ask questions of identity and to examine the nature of leadership.

The crowds here, like other places, were meeting Jesus and then going away mumbling to themselves opinions as to who exactly he might be. Maybe Elijah returned or perhaps even Jeremiah.

You get the impression that the crowds were beginning to feel that all those stories they read in the Synagogue were actually becoming true again in their lifetime through the ministry of Jesus. It felt as if God was breaking in so these were exciting if confusing times.

But in the intimate circle of the disciples, amongst these friends upon whom so much actually would ultimately depend, Jesus seems impatient with the vox pops opinions of the crowds. ‘That’s all very well’, he says, but Peter, ‘Who do you say that I am?’

At that point the fisherman disciple seems to get a grade 9 in his GCSE and go to the top of the class with his answer.

‘You are the Christ’ – we call it Peter’s Confession – and in our New Testaments, written in Greek, Christ is the word for Messiah – so actually Peter was saying: Jesus you are Messiah.

It would have been a personal response – as are all our responses on a journey of faith. We speak as we find. We make a confession on the basis of the experiences of God we have known.

Peter had come a long way since Jesus called him by Lake Galilee, inviting him to leave his fishing nets and follow him. Disciples like Peter had travelled with Jesus and listened to him for many hours.

Put it all together and Peter says: You are the Christ.

Yet what did that mean to Peter? And it’s perhaps here that the initial clarity of this Confession becomes a little obscure.

There is the expression: Can you walk the talk? Meaning – do your actions really live up to your words?

Commenting on this passage Bishop John Spong says: Peter could say the words, but he could not live the message. Not now, at least.

Maybe he isn’t so different from any of us.

How many times have we left a Sunday service inspired to live the week differently only to return the following Sunday frustrated that by Monday lunchtime we were once again battling with old demons.

Faith never comes fully formed.

For Peter this was a wonderful moment of personal discipleship – probably quite similar to that experienced by us as we were baptised or confirmed and made our own confession in Jesus Christ.

Yet Caesarea Philippi wasn’t the end game for Peter. He now had to explore, from the privileged position of actually walking alongside Jesus, what Messiahship might actually look like for his master.

And we get the impression that it turned out to be very different from what Peter had first expected.

The Jesus that would eventually leave Caesarea Philippi and travel south down to Jerusalem would end up as a crucified Messiah; and probably at this point that is something that no one in the Jesus’ crowd anticipated.

Jesus embraces what others might have called weakness as he seems to allow the events of Holy Week to unravel without hitting back. In Gethsemane’s garden, he is saddened when Peter takes up arms, before his accusers in the halls of the powerful Jesus remained silent and upon the cross he asks God to forgive those who harmed him.

We sometimes sing a hymn here about Good Friday and it’s for all those reasons, and more, that we have changed one of the lines that says of the cross: The wrath of God was satisfied to The Love of God was glorified.

Jesus shows us how God loves. With grace. With self-giving. With forgiveness.

All of this is important because the Jesus we believe in shapes the community we become.

If we believe Jesus showed us a God who is demanding and judgemental then chances are we become that sort of community.

Our understanding of God matters.

If you were to go along to one of the Beyond Difference Group meetings we hold in Amersham and Chesham which bring together Muslims and Christians in dialogue you would hear Muslims totally reject the action of terrorism done in the name of Allah – because this is not the God they believe in. Our Muslim friends at Beyond Difference tell us again and again that their essential understanding of God and faith is ‘peace’.

In our Christian history there have been times when we have acted with violence because we believed in a forceful and empire building God. So, Crusader Knights rode to Jerusalem with crosses on their tunics to slaughter thousands of Muslims.

Our understanding of God matters.

The words we use to describe God in our hymns matter as do the titles we give to Jesus in our prayers.

We have to work hard at this because if we exclusively employ kingly and victorious language we end up with a God who can intervene and do anything – yet we pray for Syria and there is no end to the fighting and we long for healing for a loved one and none comes. For some such a journey leads to disillusionment and they sadly end up leaving The Church.

Yet describe God exclusively in human terms we can understand and we possibly loose a sense of wonder and the inexplicable surprise that from time to time comes our way and thrills us.

As I have pondered today’s reading I think I have come to the conclusion that Peter’s Confession of Jesus as the Christ that day was very much a work in progress one rather than an ‘end game’ statement – and that isn’t a bad thing because it probably describes where we all are.,

Over this summer, during the TV drought that always afflicts the Green household at this time of year, when the cry goes up night after night ‘there’s nothing on’! we’ve been watching some films and box sets – and one or two have had the most appalling endings, actually they have bene non-ending. No climax. Little resolution. Just draw dropingly limping to the credits – presumably in the hope that this actually isn’t the end and if they leave enough in the plot so unresolved the commissioning editors just have to say ‘yes’ to another series!

Well I think Caesarea Philippi isn’t the final episode in Peter’s pilgrimage. I’d commission series two!

He still has so much to learn about Jesus. He still has to travel with him from the north to the south. He still has to listen to more parables. And crucially he still has to go through Holy Week.

So essentially – it’s not so much what Peter calls Jesus now that really matters. It’s what he will say about him after the Cross and Resurrection. What will he have discovered about Jesus and this Christ like God by then?

We all need to go on and on discovering who God is.

When I did my second degree I graduated with a retired minister of 85 – he was one of the most engaging and energetic people on the course – such an inspiring colleague who never wanted to give up thinking, exploring and having his horizons broadened.

This process is sometimes like restoring a painting.

Think of those masterpieces in the National Gallery that look as if they were painted yesterday. Some are like that because the restorers have painstakingly spent hours cleaning away the layers of grime that has dulled these pictures over the years. As these layers have been removed the painting has grown more interesting not less, more vibrant, more inspirational.

I sometimes think that about faith.

Inevitably it might have been layered with misunderstandings, traditional yet inadequate explanations and childlike concepts that need some work done on them.

As we think, as we seek to apply faith honestly to the experiences of life we go through then this painting of God we have in our mind is being changed and restored with some unhelpful layers wiped away.

To address these issues, even to reassess our understanding of God, need not be a negative, diminishing process – but rather like looking at an old painting now restored what we end up with is something brighter, more honest with a hidden beauty that actually inspires.

I believe Peter was on such a journey. At Caesarea Philippi, he expressed a deep faith and allegiance to Jesus as the Christ. That faith would indeed be tested. Peter would fail. That faith would have to accept new horizons and understandings. Peter would be reinstated and recommissioned. And in the end Peter will be sustained and energised by a faith that wasn’t afraid to change. And in all of this God became bigger not smaller.

May that be our experience too. In the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 25th August 2017*