

Trinity 11

There are two great themes in the gospels that the cliché Christianity of the media forgets. One is *inclusion* – which we had last week, at the end of the parables and miracles series of gospels – and the other is *recognition*: acknowledging who Jesus is, not just saying it, but acting on it. This one is actually a clincher: how we answer the question 'who do you say I am' is the key to whether or not we have become Christians as well as members of the Church.

Peter's recognition and proclamation of who Jesus really is can be found in all three synoptic gospels. There is even an old feast of the Confession of Peter (in January) to mark it. In the other gospels Peter answers that Jesus is the Christ; today Matthew reports Peter adding the title 'Son of God' and we hear Jesus' response:

16 Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' 17 And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

In Matthew's telling of the Gospel, the recognition of who Jesus is has special significance for who the *Church* is (the only appearances of the word 'church' in the gospels are in Matthew). Peter emerges as a focus for this in chapter 16[:17–19] as the "rock" on which the church is to be built. But two chapters later, in Matthew 18[:18], where the same binding and loosing power is conferred on all who are listening, the keys are democratized, given to the whole church: Peter's faith, and the charism of alternative leadership, is not his alone. Pope Francis seems to have noticed. And recognition of Jesus, acknowledgement that he is the Son of God, is key.

What was true then is true now. At some point, if we want our faith to move on from being a code of law, a concept, some excellent ideas or a beautiful cultural artefact, towards something we experience, something constitutive of who we are in the world, we each have to take the faith of the church, the Gospel which emerges from the gospels, and make it our own, make it what defines us as persons. That requires an encounter with Christ. It isn't enough just to belong to the club; we are commissioned like the disciples to bear witness to Christ's *personal* love in the workplace, with our friends, in our families (whatever family means for us).

Unusually, today's reading from Paul is well-integrated in with this gospel. I commented in Friday's email on the wonderful opening verses of Romans 12

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul's development of this into one of his Big Ideas, that *we* are truly the Body of Christ, is a conceptual leap that has formed linguistic constructs: the word 'body' to mean an organisation, and the idea of 'membership', derive from this idea of Paul's. And it is not intended to be a *metaphor*. Bishop John Robinson, of *Honest to God* fame, wrote a now largely-forgotten book, *The Body*, in which he examined what Paul meant by saying Christians are 'the body of Christ' and realised that Paul meant exactly what he said.

When I say to a friend, 'you're a star', I am using a metaphor. I don't mean that my friend is a fiery ball of molten matter found millions of light years away in deep space. But when Paul says that 'we are the body of Christ (and individually members of it)' he is not, Robinson showed, creating a metaphor. Paul recognised Jesus and his church as one body – not *like* one body but really one body – when, on his way to make life difficult for the Christians in Damascus, he heard Jesus say, 'why are you persecuting *me*?' (Acts 9.4). That first-person accusative pronoun insists that the Christians of Damascus and Jesus himself are indivisible and indistinguishable.

This means that you and I are also, literally not metaphorically, members of one another in Paul's teaching. In his earlier letter to Corinthian Christians Paul wrote graphically of the organic interdependence of Christians. You'll remember the passage, about the foot and the hand, the eye and the ear, and of what nonsense it would be if these parts of us insisted that they had nothing to do with each other; he alluded as well to our less presentable features. As Fr John Pridmore puts it, those on the PCC we regard as armpits are also a necessary part of the Christian anatomy.

So, when we are disunited, we are literally dis-membering ourselves. The church, all churches, have always had this suicidal tendency, which is, quite simply, sinful. Whoever is next to me in the Christian community, whatever our differences, is *part of me*. Paul calls that 'discerning the body' (1 Corinthians 11 [.29]).

Together with Jesus' words in today's gospel, this has an outward-looking consequence and also an internal consequence for us as the Church. Looking outward I must never forget that I might be the only face of Christianity that another person encounters today. The way in which I bind them up or set them free might be the measure by which they judge the Church as the face of Christ in the world. But looking at my neighbour in the Christian community the same responsibility applies, however difficult it feels. It all hinges on that great question, asked of each of us today, 'who do you say that I am?' How we answer that question reveals so much about whether Christ is an idea we like or a passion we share.