

Diocesan Sermon - 23rd August 2026
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev'd Jeni Bedding

Who do you say I am?

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Father God may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer.
Amen

Our readings today centre on our faith, our relationship with God and his purpose, that we can be part of, when we look to Him, listen to Him and focus on Him alone; it is a conscious choice we all make.

Isaiah is repeatedly calling for his peoples' attention, 'listen to me'; 'look to me', lift up your eyes to the heavens'. The people have been enduring the long Babylonian exile, and they are probably wondering why God has stopped listening to them. Isaiah reassures them that God has not stopped listening and that He wants them to listen to Him.

He reminds them of 'the rock from which you were hewn' and 'the quarry from which you were dug'. To go back from whence they came, back to their tradition, back to the solid rock, back to Abraham and Sarah. When we lose our bearings in life, think that God is not listening, we need to go back to our spiritual foundation. Who is God, and who are we in God?

Our psalmist speaks of the benefits of listening to God, of keeping in conversation with Him. 'I will give you thanks', 'I will bow down to you', and 'at a time that I call out to you, you gave me an answer and put new strength within my soul'. God not only hears us, but he responds to us, especially when we are at our lowest and need his reassurance, and grace and mercy.

In our gospel reading Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. The scene is set in Caesarea Philippi; this is the turning point in Jesus' ministry. Up until this point in their journey Jesus has been instructing the disciples as to what this ministry looks like. He has sent them into the crowds to listen to what people are saying about him. They are about to turn toward Jerusalem where Jesus will enter his passion, but before he embarks on this journey, he wants to ensure the disciples know who he truly is; have they been listening?

‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ The people sing his praises, comparing him to well-known Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah and others say John the Baptist.

They will remember him as a good man, someone who healed the sick, fed the hungry crowds and spoke eloquently; too bad he was crucified and died before his time... Isn't this how we hear him referred to by many today?

People can respect the man called Jesus as a good person, but God calls us to acknowledge him as our Lord and Saviour, to have a personal relationship with Him. When Jesus sent his disciples into the crowds it was not to hear what they thought, it was so that the disciples were forced to make their own decisive personal decision. Jesus had hand-picked these men to continue his ministry after his passion: crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He needed to know they were choosing this mission for themselves.

‘But who do you say that I am?’ This is a question we need to ask ourselves today. Who is Christ to you? When we look around today, we see Jesus depicted in our image, who we want Him to be. In the 1980s the question ‘what would Jesus do?’ was asked. But unfortunately, instead of searching His Word and being guided by his example, many made him conform to their beliefs and sadly not much has changed today.

Jesus asks, ‘Who do you say I am?’ so that we will stop, focus on Him, look to God and listen for the true answer. Peter declares, ‘you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God’. Jesus replies, ‘Blessed are you...for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.’ ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’ Jesus is laying the foundation for his church, and not even death itself will prevail against it; Jesus has conquered death.

As we have read in the Acts of the Apostles, like Jesus’ journey, the disciples’ was not going to be an easy one. They needed to ground their faith, not in Moses law, but in God’s grace and mercy bought by the shedding of Jesus’ blood. In our readings from Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul has been exploring what it means to live in a righteous community. Romans chapters 1-3 demonstrate that no one is righteous in God’s sight. Romans chapters 4-5 remind us that like Abraham, God credits righteousness to sinners who have faith in Jesus Christ. Romans chapters 6-8 reveal that when we choose union with Christ, we are freed

from the Law, and that the Holy Spirit, gives us the power to live a righteous life.

Romans chapters 9-11 show us that the Israelites' temporary fall was because they lost sight of God and failed to seek righteousness from him, and Paul tells us that God was just in his dealings with them. In today's reading from chapter 12 Paul begins to describe to us what the righteous style of the new Christian community looks like when their focus is on God, and they remain in conversation with Him, so that His will can be fulfilled through them as it was through Jesus, using the gifts they have been given.

Like the disciples, we need to ground our faith in God, in Jesus' blood and righteousness. We need to look to all God has done, in showing us sinners mercy, and respond to him freely out of grateful love. We need to present ourselves as a living sacrifice before God in worship. We do this in every aspect of our lives, worshipping in church, when we pray, sing praises, give aid to our neighbour, do our jobs honestly and well. Everything we do, when we do it with a desire to please God, is worship. Always remembering that we do it to the measure God has assigned. He does not want us to burn out; we need to listen to Him to know when we should say "no".

Grounding our hope in our faith in God means a complete transformation of our lives, not unlike the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. It is a renewing of our minds; a transformation in the way we look at life: our values, thoughts, motives, the way we evaluate our choices; we need to look to God and see everything from God's point of view so that we can discern his will, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

Paul then goes on to say in Christ we who are many are one body; we are to be in fellowship with one another with Christ as our head. Because we choose to be united with Christ, we are to be united to each other, accepting of one another's differences of race, gender, socio economic condition, denomination, style of worship. Christ is who draws us all to him, so we should gladly welcome anyone who confesses Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Unity means equality but does not mean sameness; we all have different gifts that are needed in Jesus' army. Those who do not look to God, listen to Him and choose to ground their faith in God, choose to follow Satan the deceiver, because at the end of days there is no middle ground. We choose eternal life with God or eternal damnation.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen