



## Sermon by Diana Johnson

Romans 12: 1-8; and Matt. 16: 13-20

St Mary and St Michael, Trumpington

23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020

Trinity 11

### Streamed 10am CW Communion Service

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. (Ps 19.14 alt.)

Our theme today is that the Church is the Body of Christ, built on the strong rock of faith and energised by the living Breath of God. And our reading from Romans tells us something about that Church. In Romans 4-5, Paul uses the imagery of the human body to bring out both the diversity and the unity of the Christian community. Paul writes: "we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function". I can see that describes us here in Trumpington rather well. So that's good. Verse 5 continues that "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. [REPEAT] **we, who are many, are one body in Christ.** It says that the Church is us, all of us, working together. And that the heart of the matter is our service of Jesus: we are "in Christ" or we are not a Church. To confess Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is to demonstrate a right understanding of who Jesus is. To be, as the Epistle tells us to be, "in Christ".

Let's dwell a moment on a bit of a biography: Theodulf, a ninth-century priest, had risen from humble beginnings to serve in the court of Charlemagne. Known for his articulate pen and creative mind, Theodulf distinguished himself by writing hymns and other theological stuff. However, when Charlemagne died, Theodulf was banished into obscurity by one of the emperor's sons.

Theodulf, who had stood before the most powerful man in the world, died in Saint Aubin monastery. Yet it was in this place of obscurity that Theodulf wrote his best-known hymn, "All Glory, Laud, and Honour," traditionally sung on Palm Sunday, and which includes this confession about Jesus' identity:

*Thou art the King of Israel, Thou David's royal Son, Who in the Lord's Name comest, The King and Blessed One.*

So with those words and maybe the tune worming in our ears, let's turn to that amazing Gospel reading now.

To confess Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is to demonstrate a right understanding of who Jesus is. As Matthew has said from the opening of his Gospel, Jesus is



the Messiah<sup>1</sup>. And, although there are many ways that Matthew develops his understanding of what the Messiah means - such as Jesus as representative of all of Israel, or Jesus as Wisdom - confessing Jesus as the Messiah is paramount for Matthew.

It is not surprising that in modern times, too, the church has often seen the confession of Jesus as God, dwelling on earth in human form - as the most important confession to make.

What would it mean for me to preach and teach Jesus as the Messiah in fresh ways in Trumpington, I asked myself?

First, such teaching would necessarily require me to explain what "Messiah" means, and that would be a jolly good thing. It would require us to understand the Jewish backdrop for Jesus more so than we have been accustomed to doing, since "Messiah" means something only in the story of God's work in and for Israel.

Second, focusing on the truth that Jesus is the Messiah should follow the same path of thinking that Paul followed when he preached Messiah Jesus - for that is what "Christ Jesus" means - when he preached Messiah Jesus to non-Jewish audiences. Paul translates this category for his audience by emphasizing Jesus as "Lord" overall, a title that had great significance in his own context, as "Caesar is Lord" was a common affirmation in the first-century world. By faith, we say "Jesus is Lord," and that he has all power<sup>2</sup>, in the face of a world where perceived evidence to the contrary abounds.

And let's also note that this Church I'm talking of is not perfect! Although Peter and the rest of the Twelve confess Jesus' true identity, they do not provide an exemplary portrait of discipleship. Oh, no.

The awkward evidence is that these disciples are pretty flawed human beings all-round. Really. The disciples continue to misunderstand much of what Jesus teaches, and they will misunderstand the nature of his mission as the Messiah<sup>3</sup>. They will even deny Jesus, one day soon in the story.

More generally, there is a tendency to idealize various biblical characters and then preach them as moral examples. This is certainly the case in teaching the Bible to children, where we tend to minimize the faults of biblical figures, especially those we have difficulty explaining to children (e.g., sexual sins of Judah, of David, etc.). Yet by idealizing and moralizing these characters, we not only do a disservice to the authors' intentions; we also run the risk of down-playing the theological themes of these narratives, in which God is the focus (and hero), **and works through humans who are by no means perfect**. Remember that when next you are irritated by someone in Church, will you?

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<sup>1</sup> 1:1

<sup>2</sup> see 1 Cor. 15:24-28

<sup>3</sup> 16:21-23

Thinking, as we are today, about Peter *and* the other disciples *and* by extension the whole Church, should therefore include the ways in which they are flawed. Ways in which **we** are flawed. And that requires us to explore how Jesus meets us in our weaknesses.



The following poem, on your pew sheets, "Trembling Limbs," by Jeannine Brown, is based on Hebrews 12:1-3, and expresses how Jesus remains with us even as we fall short of the mark.

Trembling limbs as the race begins  
I wonder if I'll finish this course I've begun;  
Looking in I see all my sin,  
And it drags me down, keeps me from moving ahead.

But far, far in the distance I see him  
He is there holding out his hand;  
He's the one who's started this race before me,  
And he's promised to see me to the end.

Take courage, my soul  
There are many who've gone before,  
And the author and finisher of faith  
Cheers you on - Jesus cheers you on.

Far, far in the distance I see him  
He is there holding out his hand;  
He's the one who's started this race before me,  
And he's promised to see me to the end.

**So**, Matthew has told us of Jesus' ministry to Israel, showing Jesus teaching and doing miracles with authority all the while including seekers, sinners, and even Gentiles in his kingdom ministry. As Matthew clarifies Jesus' identity as the healing and compassionate Messiah, he also illustrates a variety of responses to Jesus: the unbelief of the Jewish leaders and Jesus' hometown, the little faith and frequent misunderstanding of the twelve disciples, and the faith of various ones who come to Jesus for healing and ministry. At the climax of this part of the story, Peter and the other disciples confess Jesus to be the Messiah.

**So**, would you stand now and join me in saying our own confession of faith, the Creed, and savour these words when we get to them: **We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God...**

**[Stand together]**

Word count: 1214 Time: 10 mins  
Approx. 125 words min-1