**Sermon for Sunday 27th August 2023 Matthew 16 v 13 – 20**

In the name of the father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen

I would like to start this morning by reading a short extract from the book ‘Fearfully and Wonderfully made’ by Philip Yancey

*A certain bridge in South America consists of interlocking vines supporting a precariously swinging platform hundreds of feet above the river. I know the bridge has supported hundreds of people over many years and as I stand at the edge of the chasm I can see people confidently crossing the bridge. The engineer in me wants to weigh all the factors; measure the stress tolerance of the vines, test the wood for termites survey all the bridges in the area for one that might be stronger. I could spend a lifetime determining whether the bridge is really trustworthy. Eventually if I truly want to cross I must take a step. When I put my weight on the bridge and walk across even though my heart is pounding and my knees are shaking I am making a statement declaring my position. IN the Christian world I must sometimes live like this, making choices which contain inherent uncertainty. If I wait for all the evidence to be in, for everything to be settled I’ll never move.*

I would like you to keep this passage in mind as we turn to think about today’s readings.

The gospel reading today is one of the pivotal passages of Matthew.

Caesarea Philippi was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee at the foot of Mount Hermon. The site was beautiful and lush compared to much of the surrounding countryside. Jesus may have brought the disciples here because it would be away from the crowds and gave them time for this private conversation, a retreat.

At this point we are less than a year before Jesus’ suffering and death. The last year of Jesus’ life involved increasing rejection of him by Israel. Jesus spent much of his time teaching and preparing his disciples for the ordeal of his suffering and death.

There were various opinions going around about the identity of Jesus. The Sadducees said he was a lunatic. The scribes said he was uneducated but none of the popular beliefs given by the disciples to Jesus identified him as the Messiah. At the beginning of his ministry some had thought of him as the Messiah but when he didn’t gather armies and set up a temporal kingdom that would be prosperous and flourishing they began to doubt him and the Pharisees had continued their strong campaign against Jesus.

Jesus wanted to know what others thought of him. The people were looking to find someone worthy of comparison with Jesus. They accorded high status to him but they failed to accord him the highest status.

So why John the Baptist? He had been a Holy prophet and taught people about turning back to God.

And why Elijah or Jeremiah? They could see that Jesus was a prophet and these prophets spoke out about God’s truth.

Then he asked the disciples Simon Peter replied immediately saying ‘You are the Christ the Son of the Living God’. Jesus was aware that the disciples had been better taught than others and had by their intimacy with him greater advantages of getting knowledge. The disciples were being trained to teach others and therefore they needed to understand the truth themselves. Jesus went on to explain that Peter’s blessedness was not of nature but of Grace. He was the son of an average family. The knowledge he had shown was due to the revelation he had from Christ’s Father who is in Heaven. He is pronounced blessed as having a true knowledge of God.

Jesus then gives him a new name to mark this event and prophesy Simon’s leadership role in the church. It is often translated as ‘Rock’ but in the Greek it has the sense of a great boulder.

The church is to be established on the firm bedrock of Jesus Christ, the Son of God which Simon Peter has just confessed and it will be led by the human Peter with strong faith in that truth.

This is the first time ‘church’ is mentioned in the New testament and it must have come as quite a shock to the disciples who had been thinking of a kingdom with a king on the throne to hear that it was planned to be more of a community or society of equal people. It doesn’t seem to be just earthly either. Jesus sees it as standing firm against all kinds of evil attack, form outside and in, being constantly renewed and revived through all centuries, touching both heaven and earth. That is the same church which we belong to now in this parish in this country.

The disciples were ready and able to go forth and do God’s work. They were secure in the knowledge that Jesus was the Son of the Living God. They would have definitely have been prepared to step out onto that bridge that I referred to at the beginning without a moment’s hesitation trusting in God’s power and authority.

In the story I close with the student would definitely be ready to cross the bridge.

There was a professor of philosophy who was a deeply committed atheist. His primary goal for one required class was to spend the entire semester proving that God couldn't exist. His students were always afraid to argue with him because of his impeccable logic. Sure, some had argued in class at times, but no one had ever really gone against him because of his reputation. At the end of every semester on the last day, he would say to his class of 300 students, "If there is anyone here who still believes in God, stand up!"

In twenty years, no one had ever stood up. They knew what he was going to do next. He would say, "Because anyone who believes in God is a fool. If God existed, he could stop this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground. Such a simple task to prove that He is God, and yet He can't do it."

And every year, he would drop the chalk onto the tile floor of the classroom, and it would shatter into a hundred pieces. All of the students would do nothing but stop and stare. Most of the students thought that God couldn't exist. Certainly, a number of Christians had slipped through, but for 20 years, they had been too afraid to stand up.

Well, a few years ago there was a freshman who happened to enroll. He was a Christian and had heard the stories about his professor. He was required to take the class for his major, and he was afraid. But for three months that semester, he prayed every morning that he would have the courage to stand up no matter what the professor said or what the class thought. Nothing they said could ever shatter his faith...he hoped.

Finally, the day came. The professor said, "If there is anyone here who still believes in God, stand up!" The professor and the class of 300 people looked at him, shocked, as he stood up at the back of the classroom.

The professor shouted, "You FOOL!!! If God existed, he would keep this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground!"

He proceeded to drop the chalk, but as he did, it slipped out of his fingers, off his shirt cuff, onto the pleat of his pants, down his leg, and off his shoe. As it hit the ground, it simply rolled away unbroken. The professor's jaw dropped as he stared at the chalk. He looked up at the young man and then ran out of the lecture hall.

The young man who had stood proceeded to walk to the front of the room and shared his faith in Jesus for the next half hour. 300 students stayed and listened as he told of God's love for them and of His power through Jesus.

So are you ready to stand up and make the confession of Christ and follow God’s path for us and step out on that bridge.

Amen