

### **Mat 16:13-20 – “Holy Polling Results ...”**

Did you watch any of the hooplah on TV over the American elections over the past few days? I'm a bit of a news junkie anyway, but watching it had a beneficial side effect – it helped distract me from running amok because my internet connection is down. I can handle being reduced to checking my email only once or twice a day – as long as it is my choice. But when my connection to the internet goes down, I am so distracted I can hardly function – it's like somebody has taken away my oxygen. What really drives me to distraction, though, are the procedures that Telus have put into place to guarantee that you absolutely cannot talk with anyone who knows anything, most specifically the real techies in the back room. I have been working with computers since 1962, just a few years short of half a century. I have designed computers at the chip level, I have programmed just about every kind of computer that has shown up over that half century, I could go on, and on, and on about what I know about computers, computer communications, hardware and software. So perhaps you can understand when I call to report that my communication is down, and I get directed to a nice young person in Manilla in the Phillipines, who has no option but to walk me step-by-step through test procedures I have already run, that my patience is tested to the very breaking point! I'm hoping that the service person they're sending out today(!) will hear the message I put on my cell phone to say that I'll be home by 12:30 and will show up appropriately instead of rescheduling for a few days from now. My connection being down might exert less pressure on me if it didn't mean that the church mail is down, the website cannot be accessed, and we cannot audiocast over the web ... but I suspect I would still go wrangy!

OK – end of rant – back to politics, mostly but not exclusively American. At least with Wolff Blitzer yakking endlessly on about the pick of the Democratic VP candidate and the convention that starts tomorrow, we have a bit of a respite from the endless poll results that are constantly being picked apart like fresh chicken entrails. CNN even goes so far as to give results on a “poll of polls!” And then of course there's always Lou Dobbs who manages to sound excited at the end of each of his programs reporting that 97% of respondents have voted ‘yes’ to his poll question which is usually some form of, “Do you think Americans are wonderful?” with a smug paternalism that implies the other 3% should be ground up into hamburger.

While I've never conducted many polls, I do have enough of a statistical background to be immediately suspicious of the results, knowing that the questions can easily be loaded to give you whatever result you want. With a bit of knowledge, and a little bit of work, it is possible to mess up the results should you be asked to participate in a poll. Doing that has a profound effect on the outcome of the survey or the poll, and even on the nation as a whole. You've all heard on TV or radio, or read in a paper or magazine, the expression “42% of Canadians believe ...”. How many of you realize that such a conclusion is usually drawn from asking questions of fewer than 1,000 people?! There's a whole pile of statistical theory behind determining the necessary size of the sample, or at least calculating how ‘right’ or how ‘wrong’ the conclusions are likely to be given the sample size. But all of those mathematical formulas assume certain behaviours by the respondents, and so someone who understands the theory of statistical sampling can distort the data with carefully crafted answers. Frightening, isn't it?!

All of this thought about believing comes (I believe) from the focus of the incident captured in our reading from Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus conducts a mini-poll of his disciples. We only have one response recorded, but out of a population size of 12 that should be a fairly good sample, especially since it's not a random sampling from an independent group.

Moreover, as is true of any poll, the design of the questions affects the answers. (Now note that I am in no way saying that Jesus is like Lou Dobbs, and certainly not the converse!) “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”, Jesus asks the assembled disciples, biasing their thinking about the Messiah even before they have a chance to answer. The disciples report is a bit like a set of survey results, although the numbers are somewhat less than precise. “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah”, they reply, and even have a sort of “other” category, lumping a group into the “one of the prophets” group. And then comes the real question in the survey, “but who do you say I am?”, to which we have the definite answer from Simon Peter, “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Some people try to make a big distinction between the expression “Son of Man” and “Son of .. God” here, but they’re missing the point. Jesus is often clearly identified throughout scripture not only as the Son of God but as the Son of Man, so for the purposes of the survey here the terms are interchangeable. The real issues here are first the difference between what the people in general believe and what the disciples believe, and second what specifically the disciples do believe. The answer from Peter is obviously the answer Jesus was looking for, and he proclaims his approval in the most glowing of terms. “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah!”, Jesus states, pointing out that Peter’s insight is not so much a result of him being particularly smart, or ahead of the group, but instead a gift, a consequence of divine inspiration. Jesus enthusiastically continues with the still-famous play on Peter’s name (*Peter=petros, rock=petra*) declares that “upon this rock I will build my church”, and even declares that he will give to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Now that’s quite a gift for participating in a survey! But of course the acclamation and promise are not just for participating, those magnificent gifts are in response to the insight, the faith and belief expressed by Peter.

It’s important to notice an important detail in Peter’s statement of faith, or more accurately something that isn’t there. Peter does not say, “we believe ...” or even “I believe ...”; what he says is “you are ...”. That is a most crucial, most profound difference, one that the polls and surveys try so desperately to acknowledge and work so hard to compensate. It is the difference between what we believe, and what we state that we believe. There is a huge difference between Peter saying, “I believe you are the Messiah...” and saying, “You are the Messiah...”. Saying, “I believe” implies a worked-through deliberate decision, the product of thinking and evaluating. Saying, “you are” implies a belief that has been incorporated into the very fabric of the proclaimer, a position of faith that has become so integral that it shapes all thought and action.

Please don’t misunderstand me, here. I am not saying that a confessional statement of the form “I believe ..” is bad; indeed our understanding of a person being accepted as a full member is based upon she or he being able to profess their faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, which of course begins, “I believe ...” But I do claim that belief stated in the form of “God is the creator of heaven and earth...” is expressed in a form that is stronger than “I believe ...”. This difference became clearest in the gospels in Peter himself, as he would soon not only proclaim his undying loyalty with his mouth, but also fulfill Jesus’ prediction that he would betray that loyalty with denials from his mouth. What is abundantly clear, however, after some two thousand years, is that Peter’s true belief and faith was as solid as the rock Jesus used in his example. How do we know? How can we be sure of what it was that Peter really believed? The answer of course lies in what he did. What we say may or may not represent what we believe, but what we do is probably the best indicator of our true beliefs. Both scripture and tradition attest to Peter’s loyalty to Jesus as the Son of Man and Son of God right up until Peter’s own

ugly death. Proclaiming the gospel message of God's forgiveness, reconciliation and salvation in Jesus the Christ; working tirelessly to spread that word to all who would listen, and many who wouldn't; constantly striving to bring together those who professed the same belief, and in doing so bringing into being the church of which Jesus spoke. In all of his life that followed, Peter proclaimed his belief not only in words, but in the powerful and undeniable currency of actions.

That of course is where this story touches us, where it intersects with our faith and our lives. It is the same for us as for Peter, that what we do says more about what we truly believe than does what we say we believe. This is not to say that we are lying about what we believe, but sometimes we may not even be clear about what we truly believe. For example, most of us would profess a belief in God as creator of heaven and earth. Most of us would even declare that we believe God is still active in that creation. However, I would suspect that at least some of us either don't pray, or pray with a sense that it's a message tossed out into the wind, and that might or might not get heard, thus betraying our real belief that God isn't active in our lives.

Most Christians would have no trouble proclaiming with their mouths that God is a God of infinite mercy, or at least that they believe that to be so. Many, at the same time, exhibit a kind of "hang 'em high" position towards those who are most in need of God's mercy, betraying a wide gulf not only between their professed belief and their lived belief, but also between themselves and those who so desperately need the mercy.

Many faithful can easily profess God's grace in Christ Jesus in word and song, but live out their faith unable to accept his forgiveness for others, or worse yet for themselves. One of the clearest examples of this came from a person I know who was attending his daughter's wedding. This man is a person of deep, devout faith, professed at every opportunity. He tries to live his life very much in accordance with his faith, and this causes him a lot of personal anguish. He was in conflict, because in his faithfulness he couldn't agree with the principles involved in his daughter's wedding, and he was unsure of whether he should attend or not. He didn't see (until I pointed it out to him) that his manner was conveying a message quite different from what he thought it was, and that by being grumpy and unhappy he was proclaiming a lack of joy in his faith, which was the total opposite of what he professed to believe.

I don't mean to pick on him, because we all do the same thing. In one way or another, our actions often tell a different story about what we believe than our words do, and as the old saying goes, "actions speak louder than words". It is a difficult process, and sometimes even a painful one, for us to examine ourselves critically, to assess what statements we are making about our beliefs by our actions. But it's a process that is going on all the time, as others conduct "silent" holy polls, watching us and drawing conclusions about our faith from our actions.

What do our actions proclaim about our faith? Do they reveal a firm belief in life and life abundant? Do they reveal a sense of peace that passes all understanding (even when the internet is down)? Do our actions, more than our words, proclaim with clarity, strength, firmness and conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God?