

Mat 16:13-20 – “Words or Actions”

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” With this question Jesus begins a critical dialogue with his assembled disciples. They respond with an answer that shows the people seem a bit vague or at least without agreement – “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. But the Jesus switches to the real heart of his enquiry, “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 that’s not the real issue. Both of those terms refer to the expected Messiah, the one anointed by God to lead the Israelite people to both reconciliation and greatness again. The scriptures identify Jesus throughout not only as the Son of God but as the Son of Man, so for the purposes of the discussion here the terms are interchangeable. The real issues here are twofold: first, the difference between what the people in general believe and what the disciples believe, and secondly what specifically do the disciples 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, and goes on to point 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 answering a question – 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.

We should 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 polls and surveys try so desperately to acknowledge and work so hard to compensate for, namely 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 belief stated in the form of “God is the creator of heaven and earth...” seems somehow deeper, more incorporated than just saying “I believe ...” That difference was shown clearly 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 Peter 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. And yet I still encounter faithful people who don't really expect their prayers to be answered, and others who are surprised when those prayers are answered.

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. And yet a disturbing number 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. One only has to watch the news on TV to see and hear politicians espousing a return to "values of the faith" out of one side of their mouths and "harsher on crime" out of the other side.

Many faithful 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. 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.

But we need to carefully understand that the real answer to the question, "words or actions" is "both!" Words alone are empty. Actions alone are disconnected from their foundation. Today huge numbers of people live lives filled with good actions – being kind to others, doing charitable work, exhibiting compassionate love. As Christians, however, we understand that good actions alone are not adequately grounded. In our faith we realize that good actions need to be accompanied by good words, words which reveal our realization that goodness is grounded in God, that the love we attempt to practice is a response to the love offered by God to all. We understand that like Peter we are blessed, and that our blessings include the faith that we hold, and proclaim, and attempt to live out.

Peter, and the other disciples, and all the faithful who followed, were not only called to believe but to live out their beliefs. They did so, and the community – however flawed, however imperfect – we know as the church that resulted from Christ's invocation, continues to this day. At the heart of the faith of the church is the acknowledgment, echoing Peter, that Jesus is the Son of God, but also that the risen Christ is the Son of Man – and in both roles Jesus truly fulfils the messianic hope, linking people with God. At the heart of the church's practices are the Sacraments – Baptism and Holy Communion, actions which both graft us into the body of Christ and also continue to keep us one with Him – and worship, the hearing of God's Word.

But the blend of word and actions does not stop there. We are also called to proclaim to the world around us both with the words we use and the deeds we do the love of God and the reconciliation that is offered through faith in Christ. Let us participate in the feast which Christ has offered, and then let us head out to seek to fulfill the balance between words and actions of faith in our lives.