

Living the Questions

Questions have a way of marking important moments and events, as a way for people to find meaning and to make sense of significant life events. There have certainly been a lot of questions asked in the last 5 months!

So, it is with today's Gospel reading. Matthew's story has from the beginning drawn us in with the good news announcement of salvation that is to be for us in this one who as "Immanuel -- God with us", who will "save his people from their sins". Yet central questions continue to haunt the reader. The Sermon on the Mount has been delivered and Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing is well underway when John the Baptist asks that question "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Today's Gospel been acknowledged as being pivotal and climactic in Matthew's narrative of Jesus' Galilean ministry. The stories to this point have repeatedly pressed the issue of faith and discipleship as the many stories of Jesus' teaching and healing have led the disciples, and ourselves, to expect some things of this one called the Son of Man...and now these stories are focused in Jesus' intensely direct and personal question and in Peter's response, "But who do *you* say that I am?" There is no escape, and this is no time for evasion. Peter speaks for the disciples, for Matthew's gospel and the community to which it is first addressed, and certainly for us, announcing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God; and Jesus confirms this "confession" by Peter as a mark of God's blessing and as the "rock" upon which he will build his church.

For one of the first times in this gospel Jesus does not criticize or qualify Peter's disciple response as one of "little faith" but instead commends it for its revelatory power, describing it as a mark of God's "blessing"; a blessing that so often defines and accompanies what it means to be a righteous disciple of the kingdom.

Secondly, this story recognizes Peter's central role as a representative of the disciple-community.

Names are significant for Matthew. At his birth, Jesus' name is interpreted as signifying that "he will save his people from their sins". Now in parallel manner Peter's name is given significance. Peter, Jesus says, is to be the "rock" on which Jesus will build his church.

Discipleship is named, founded, and commissioned in this confession. Master and disciples are bound together in identity; and, at the end of the gospel, Jesus will commission these disciples as representatives of a new community to go in his name and make disciples of all nations.

Thirdly, it is precisely to that new community that Matthew now uniquely calls attention. On this "rock" I will build my "Church." Matthew alone of the gospel writers uses the word translated here as "Church" and he links it with talk of the kingdom. Church as the community of disciples and the kingdom of God are therefore intimately bound in Matthew's conception of Jesus' mission; and which, from this point on in the story, is linked to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

This linking of this community's existence to Peter's confession would be significant enough. But in addition, Matthew uniquely calls attention to the signal and central mission of this community. We cannot emphasize that invitation and mission too strongly in Matthew's understanding of the continuing call and responsibility of discipleship.

Some of the questions which therefore remain for us are: What would it look like for us to claim such a blessing and to have such imagination as to join in this confession and community, as Peter speaks about on our behalf? What if we were to see ourselves, too, as called and blessed in our encounter with God, and to know ourselves to be called by this promise and given a new identity as disciples and ambassadors of the kingdom? And what if we could then catch a glimpse of what it means to be part of this new community, authorized and empowered to be part of that vision that to the ends of the earth the will of God might be realized?