

SERMON FOR TRINITY II | 27 August 2017

This week, as I was reading the Gospel story for today - of Peter's saying to Jesus, 'You are the Christ', I should have been thinking of all kinds of exalted thoughts: of our visit to Caesarea Philippi last year and so on.

What I actually thought of was the very popular TV series: 'who so you think you are'?! The most recent of these was given to the family of Fearne Cotton the journalist and presenter about whom I knew nothing.

The programme started, as it always does, with a few minutes with her parents before a fascinating exploration of the life of her maternal grandfather, William Gilmour. Born in very poor circumstances in Northern Ireland he became a trained local chemist before moving to Liverpool where he married. He then, without any qualifications took on the role of a ship's surgeon and was eventually employed as the surgeon on the SS Great Britain when bringing wounded soldiers home from the Crimea. Responsible for all these terribly sick men, having to carry out amputations and all kinds of major operations, he was eventually presented to the Queen and Prince Albert and had lunch with them, in recognition of the 'exemplary work' that he did in caring for his men.

As the story unfolded, Fearne Cotton was clearly beside herself: how could someone with no training, someone who awarded himself an MD, have ever got to this point? Sheer nerve and self-confidence seems to have been the answer.

Sadly, by the end of the story, William Gilmour's luck had ran out and he was declared bankrupt and ended his days working in a workhouse dispensary, dying of tuberculosis at 60.

And all the time, Fearne was trying to see the links between his character and hers: she too had had to take risks, working in a hard industry that rewarded success but dismissed failures easily.

And the link with St Peter? In a sense Peter also had what the Jews call ‘chutzpah’ – amazing audacity. We got it last week when we see him leaping over the side of the boat, wanting to walk on water. And we saw how quickly it failed him too.

Chapter 16 of St Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus tangling with the Pharisees and Sadducees. As usual they are trying to tie Jesus up in knots, demanding a sign that he is who he says he is. Then the disciples take out the boat but then remember that that they have forgotten to bring any bread for the journey and argue among themselves whose job it should have been. It is a typically muddled kind of day where the disciples are at least fifty yards behind Jesus and he is trying to teach them so much in so little time. His sentences are cryptic and the apostles are making heavy weather of understanding what he is saying.

Then, out of the blue Jesus asks them a very straight question: *people have been talking about me all this while; who do they think I am?*

What follows is a kind of informal group discussion as the disciples try to remember what has been said behind Jesus’ back: *some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and some say you are Jeremiah or one of the prophets...* And then Jesus puts them all on the spot: *But who do you think I am?*

It has not been a good trip; there have been arguments and misunderstandings all day. But in the middle of all of that Peter stands up and says: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*

Wow.

If we didn’t know the story beforehand, we could hardly have expected that. If we want to change the question to what kind of person Peter is, we would say he was a bit like Fearne Cotton’s great grandad, William Gilmour – full of chutzpah, full of audacity – only some of which was of any use.

But what does Jesus then say: this declaration was not Peter’s at all! Peter could only say these words because the Holy Spirit had made his home with Peter – and from now this great bear of a disciple would be one the greatest foundations of the Church.

But surely, up this point, Peter was just all hot air?

Who do you think you are? Who do you think they are?

As we might expect, Jesus knows Peter so much better than anyone else. We remember his failures – the vision of food on that sail cloth, the denials in the courtyard during Jesus' trial – and of course the sinking episode in the lake. In a job application, I don't think we would bother giving Peter a second interview!

Yet Jesus puts so much trust and love into this hulk of a man and in hindsight we know that he was right: the great basilica in Rome was built to celebrate the faith of someone who never tired of serving his Lord, to the point of being crucified upside down.

But there is one more point: when we look at others success, the fact that they seem to be preferred rather than us, their skills recognized and ours ignored, think of Peter. How easy it would have been for the disciples to envy his promotion as chief of the apostles. Why Peter? He's no better than us surely?

The other great foundation father of the Church, St Paul, writing to the upwardly mobile community in Rome says: *I say to each of you, do not think of yourselves more highly than you should because to each is assigned the measure of faith that God has placed in their hearts. We have a job to do which is ours – and no one else's*

As JH Newman wrote:

O my God, you have created me do some definite service. You have committed some work to me that you have not committed to another. I have my mission; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. I will trust you, whatever, wherever I am.

If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve you. If I am in perplexity, my perplexity may serve you. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve you.

You do nothing in vain. You know what you are about. Though friends be taken away, though I feel desolate, though my spirits sink, though my future is hidden from me, yet I will trust you, for you know what you are about. I ask not so much to see as to be used: through Christ our Lord. Amen. E