

Confession of St Peter,

Holy Trinity Church, York – 21st January, 2024

The Commemoration of the Confession of St Peter is one of those Holy Days the observance of which becomes often lost in Australia due to the vagaries of our summer holidays; a time when many church goers, including clergy, are away from their parishes, on holidays. By contrast, the Commemoration of the Confession of St Peter and the Commemoration of the Conversion of St Paul which takes place also during the Christmas Eve to Australia Day period are acknowledged more suitably in the Northern Hemisphere where these two commemorations are not only celebrated but also “book end” the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In the Southern Hemisphere that important Week of Prayer is observed from Ascension Day to Pentecost Day.

I value this Holy Day, not because I wish to become entangled in the long-standing argument over whether verses seventeen to nineteen “and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” suggest/mandate St Peter to be the first amongst the Apostles and all that assertion has as to the primacy of St Peter and being Pope. What I want to, if I may use that expression, are the very direct questions which Jesus poses and “puts one right on the spot”. The first, and more polite, question which is asked by Jesus, and answered by the disciples, in the passage reads “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples’ reply is “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah, or one of the Prophets.”

The second question Jesus asks immediately after the first is more direct “But whom do you say that I am?” While we might think this is a straightforward question, and indeed one to which St Peter gives an immediate and correct response, it would not have been perceived as that easy for I think the disciples, despite their loyalty to Jesus, must have wondered at times, as to whom Jesus was, and as to what his purpose and mission was. In fact, we learn that Jesus is impressed by Peter’s answer for Jesus asserts when Peter provided the correct answer, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”, that he did so, not because

of himself, “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you” says Jesus. The answer Jesus asserts had been divinely revealed to him, “but by my Father”.

We can recognise that this scene/vignette is important in the life of Jesus, and in the records kept of his ministry, for it appears in all four Gospels. To understand the significance of that statement we should note, first, aside from the miracle of Jesus’ Resurrection, the feeding of the 5,000 people is the only miracle recorded in each of the four Gospels. Secondly, only ten stories of Jesus and/or his ministry appear in all four Gospels: beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus feeds 5,000 people, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus foretells a betrayal in his midst, Peter denies Jesus, Pilate pronounces sentence upon Jesus, the crucifixion of the King of the Jews, Jesus dies, Jesus is buried in a tomb, and some disciples went to the tomb/sepulchre. (It is worth noting that except for the first two stories, the rest all deal with the Passion of Jesus Christ). Thirdly, there are only seven parables common to all three synoptic Gospels (John’s Gospel records no parables) and they are: candle under a bushel, new cloth and old garment, new and old wineskins, the sower, the mustard seed, the wicked husbandman, and the fig tree.

Therefore, we can recognise that this story is an important moment, not only for the disciples present, but also for early Christians or “People of the Way”, as they sought to know and understand whom Jesus was, and what he intended to do and achieve. Of course, the question asked of the disciples is not one we should allow to stand, as it were, cemented in the history of a Gospel story, for the question is just as legitimately asked of each of us: “But whom do you say that I am?”

Imagine if overnight I had removed the pews and replaced them with tables and chairs upon which were placed some sheets of paper and a pen. Your task would be to write now your response to the question asked by Jesus. What might you say? How many pieces of A4 paper would you need? Would you need a replacement pen?

Perhaps even more difficult than that written exercise would be to provide your response to someone who stopped you along Avon Terrace and asked that same question. Would you have a convincing and compelling answer for the enquirer? Perhaps, we need to have one?