

What a lot of names

Matthew 16.13-20

People get embarrassed sometimes because they don't know how to address clergy. It's not surprising – there are so many possibilities. It was easier when I was the incumbent – people could say 'Vicar' or 'Rector'. Ex-service people might say 'Padre' or 'Chaplain.' I have to grit my teeth when people refer to 'The Reverend' (which is fine in writing, but not as a spoken form of address). Since moving to St Ives I have had to get used to people calling me Father Andrew. We seem to have established a compromise with most people that they say that when I am taking a service, but otherwise just stick to 'Andrew'.

But of course what people choose to call me, or feel comfortable calling me says as much about them as about me - it reflects their background, and what they have been used to. It reflects how they see me - as a person in a job (and therefore called by the job title) or as a person, (and therefore called by a name). I answer to anything - within reason - although I remember have considerable difficulty when I was in Manchester. I was going to the cemetery at the end of the road wearing a cloak, and as I passed some six-seven year olds on the other side of the road said 'Look, there's God!' But I will settle for the letter I had from a bad typist which began 'Dear Revered Body'.

Our Gospel reading today is full of names and titles. What were people to call Jesus, and what did that say about their perceptions of who he was, and what did it say about them? Jesus, you remember started out by referring to himself as the Son of Man - 'who do people say the Son of Man is?' - but then he parallels it by saying 'Who do you say I am?' - in other words, he is using this title just as a substitute for 'I'. And that might have been very ordinary - both the Aramaic 'Bar Nasha' and the Hebrew 'Ben Adam' really just mean 'a man' - and were the words that would have been used in starting a story 'There was a man who...' So at one level, it means nothing. But it was a bit strange to refer to yourself like that, and the reason almost certainly is that Jesus was wanting them to hear echoes of a very different use of the same name, which came from the book of Daniel, and which was also found in a very important book written between the two Testaments, called the Book of Enoch. Let me just remind you of the Daniel story - Daniel has visions of the empires of the earth, and then he says

I saw in the night visions, and...there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him, and to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all nations people and languages should serve him. His kingdom is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away..

In the book of Enoch, that image is made rather more powerful in terms of God's coming judgement and triumph. So Jesus probably intended them to have that idea around when he talked about himself -

because he fits the picture that Daniel drew. In fact it is interesting to see just *when* Jesus chooses to use this title - it is often in situations where he is saying something particularly important, or about his coming glory, or his return in triumph, or about judgement. Most important of all, he uses it frequently (according to the Gospel writers) when he is talking about his suffering and death.

Now we need to look at what the disciples thought he was talking about. They immediately interpreted his use of the title Son of Man to indicate that Jesus was more than he appeared to be. And we glean from that that amongst the crowds there were people who thought Jesus was John the Baptist re-incarnated, as it were, or Elijah or Jeremiah.

But then he puts them on the spot - what do *they* think? And the answer from Peter is straight from the shoulder - 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. In fact he is giving two answers there, in a sense - two titles, two names. First of all *Christ*. We tend to use that almost as a name, nowadays, but of course we are wrong. It was a title - the Greek form of the word Messiah, and like Messiah it means 'The Anointed One'. Now this title has a venerable history, and we haven't time to look at it in detail. But in general terms, it was the Messiah that the Jews of Jesus day prayed would come, to be the agent of God's kingdom being established. But they had very varied ideas. Some believed the Messiah would be a King like David had been. Others expected a supernatural, divine person. Some thought the Messiah had already come, some thought he was still to come. Some thought he was being hindered from coming by the sins of the people.

So Peter thought Jesus was this man. But did Jesus fit the picture that people had, or more precisely, the different pictures people had? The simple answer is No, he didn't. Let me just give you two or three examples of why that was so. For a start, whatever their views of the Messiah, they all saw him as a *national* figure, who would restore the fortunes of Israel. Yet it is clear that Jesus had a vision of his purpose which went well beyond those national boundaries. As Simeon said of him when he was only a baby - he was the light for the nations as well as the glory of his people Israel. Then the usual conception of the Messiah was about an otherworldly, because they had begun to believe that in this world God could never have his way. But Jesus taught his friends to pray 'thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven'. And then they all believed the job of the coming Messiah was to destroy sinners for once and for all. Jesus came with a message about *saving* sinners - which is a radically different conception.

All this leads to the rather surprising conclusion of the gospel reading - Jesus is obviously delighted that Peter has seen what he is - and has given him the appropriate name - Christ. But then he tells them all to keep quiet about it. That has been a mystery, and all sorts of theories have been put forward about it. Maybe Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah at all, and that was something only put on him by a later generation. But that doesn't make a great deal of sense. But there is sense in Jesus wanting to avoid his friends using a title that would mislead people. He could only tell them what the Messiah *was* if they didn't impose on him their pre-conceived ideas.

And isn't it interesting that in the context of Peter giving Jesus a new Title, Jesus gives him a new name as well? He has been called Simon Bar-Jonah, Simon Son of Jonah. And Simon, which means 'one who hears' becomes Peter, which means 'the rock'.. He becomes someone on whom Jesus can build, someone he can rely on. His name which means hearing has enabled him to justify the name rock.

What name do we give to the Son of Man? What name are we comfortable with as we speak of him? Maybe it is Jesus - his name. Maybe it is this title Christ, the anointed one, in whatever way we understand that. No-one can tell us we are right or wrong - and there are literally hundreds of titles and names that have been given to him by people who are his people - somewhere I have a book of meditations which reflects on a different title for every day of the year. On that day in Caesarea Philippi, Simon made a step forward in his perception of Jesus, and used a new name. But that was not the end of the tale. Later on, those closest to him found it more appropriate to call him, not Christ, but Lord, because their relationship with him had developed yet further because of what he had done. What we call him may also change as we grow in our understanding and our relationship with him. But just as I answer to anything within reason when people call me by different titles, so he responds to what we call him, and then leads us on. For like Simon, whose name changed, we also will change inside, if not in our name, as we grow closer to him.