

Doctrine worth confessing

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 August 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 13A

**Contemporary Reading: “Who am I?” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from
Letters and Papers from Prison; Matthew 16: 13-20**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Does doctrine divide? I sometimes hear that these days. Indeed, I have even heard people say they do not believe in doctrine at all. That, if you think about it, is quite a contradiction in terms. For anything you believe in, or do not believe in, is itself a doctrine. Doctrine, after all, really just means teaching. So, if someone says they do not believe in doctrine, are they really saying they do not want teaching in our world? Are all viewpoints, from flat earthers to conspiracy theorists, really equal?

I suspect that what people really mean is that they do not believe in dogma: understood as authoritatively claimed beliefs which are essentially simply imposed, and resistant to questioning, reason and experience. Modern law and science are not, in that sense, dogma, but they are forms of doctrine: guidelines or teaching which enable us to live, and, hopefully, grow together. The same can be said of doctrines of faith. Like law and science, they can be used to divide. However, if they are open to development, they can be vital as a means to enable us to live, and grow. This is core to our Gospel passage this morning, which both contains powerful and particular expressions of faith in Christ and also an abiding invitational question; ‘but who do you say I am?’ It is, I believe, in that creative doctrinal tension, that Christians best live and thrive...

Today’s Gospel passage is important to Christian Faith in a number of respects, not least doctrinal. These include the first of only three mentions of the word ‘church’ in the Gospels – the other two are in the same verse (Matthew 18.17) speaking of how followers of Christ may settle disputes. This fact is in itself important, for it tells us that the Gospel writers were clearly concerned for us to focus on God in Jesus rather than religious institutional life: that is, concentrating on theology and spirituality, rather than ecclesiology.

Alas, that has so often been honoured in the breach: where, for example, local congregations become consumed with their own priorities, or where Churches as a whole give so much time to organisation, or ethical disputes. Indeed, historically, this passage has been central to arguments about authority in the Church, being used especially to underpin papal and other claims of the Church of Rome. We might ourselves give some thought to such matters at this time, as we are asked, through the Act2 process, to contribute to future ecclesial patterns for the Uniting Church.

However, whilst church matters are important, they are very much secondary to the much deeper doctrinal questions of this text: especially that question of Jesus, to us as well as Peter, *'but who do you say I am?'* In addressing that question, we are then asked to face up not only to Peter's particular confession of faith but to our own confessional responses.

Oh dear, like doctrine, confession is another uncomfortable word today, isn't it?! Sadly, it has become associated with damaging ideas of intrinsic shame and sin: notions that are a perversion of healthy Christian teaching. Typically, it is also confused with merely saying sorry, or apologising. In contrast, confession, in its biblical and foundational meanings, is much broader. It means to acknowledge and speak with: from the Latin 'con', meaning 'with', and 'fateri' meaning 'declare' or 'avow'. This carries forward the meaning of the main Hebrew word 'yadah', which means 'praise' as well as 'confess'.

To confess Christ as 'Lord', as Peter does in today's reading, is therefore about praise rather than admission of unworthiness or sin, although that may be another appropriate aspect of confession at times. For the key element here is relationship with God. Biblically speaking, at least in Hebrew terms, confession is about 'speaking with' and acknowledging God's character, not a mere admission of human inadequacy.

The Greek word for 'confession' – homologia - expresses this well. Linguistically, this is a compound of two words: 'homo', meaning 'like', and 'logeō' meaning 'to speak'. So, for Christians, to confess is really to 'speak like', to 'speak with', to 'speak out of' our experience and relationship with God. This is not mere belief, in terms of thought or head knowledge, and still less is it dogma to impose on others. It is speaking out of the deepest truths, mysteries and encounters of our lives.

'But who do you say I am?' Jesus' question continues to challenge us and our world. When we have talked, and sometimes, screamed about churchy things, and even given up on religion, conventionally understood, as many have, that question is still there for us. For Jesus still fascinates. Even if all churches were to close, even if there were no Christians at all, Christ would still be of interest.

For that question 'who do you say I am' would still haunt us, in prompting us to consider our responses to the mystery and depth experiences of our lives and world. Each of us, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did in prison in our other reading today, has to reflect upon our own identity, and our relationship to those experiences of our lives which are 'other' than ourselves. We ourselves may not give exactly the same responses as Peter or Bonhoeffer, but we are invited to make our own confession, in the truest sense of that word.

To help with our own responses, I asked for the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) to be used this week as the translation of the Gospel text. For, whilst, as Minister here, I have so far continued the practice I inherited of using the Inclusive Bible translation, that is not without its difficulties, especially when it comes to naming God. For all its many merits, in seeking to avoid masculine specific terms, it not only sometimes struggles with alternatives but, in some of its creative paraphrases, can sometimes open up more doctrinal problems than solutions. For this week therefore, in terms of today's text, the NRSVUE certainly keeps three important features. Let me touch upon each in inviting us to our response to Jesus' question.

The first feature is the term 'Son of Man', 'Son of Humanity', or 'Huion tou anthropou' in the original Greek. It is understandable that the Inclusive Bible seeks to find another expression for this, but it is very difficult. For what we have in 'Huion tou anthropou' is not only probably one of the few terms that Jesus, rather than the Gospel traditions, actually chose for themselves. It also speaks powerfully out of Hebrew traditions which we need to dig into rather than just contemporise.

What is at stake here is power, as the 'Son of Humanity' is a term which expresses the ancient hope of divine transformation out of oppression. Not least it is thus found in Hebrew literature with an apocalyptic flavour, including in the book of Daniel in the Bible. In such places, it is uncertain whether the 'Son of Humanity' is an individual or a corporate body, like the people of Israel as a whole. It is clear however that it stands for an alternative source of ultimate power. In that sense, it accompanies the title 'Lord' as an ancient designation of the sovereignty of God in human confessions of faith.

It is crucial to observe the setting of today's passage, namely Caesarea Philippi. This was not only in Gentile territory but, of vital significance, an imperial city, bearing the emperor's own title, Caesar. Literally as well as spiritually, Peter's confession of faith is thus a revolutionary declaration, to which the ancient sovereign terms for God refer. That is underlined by the continuation of the Gospel story, where Jesus starts to tell the disciples that they must suffer and die. For suffering and death are typically accompaniments of revolutionary, including divine, and nonviolent, change.

That, of course, was part of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story. In his case, read Hitler for Caesar, but the principles are very similar. Indeed, not for nothing was much Christian opposition to Hitler focused through the deliberately named Confessing Church and based on the recovery of doctrines of divine sovereignty. For good doctrine in this regard is essential when we seek to stand against destructive powers and ideologies. As inheritors of Reformed traditions, we do well in that respect to honour the significance of confessional statements such as those in the Uniting Church's Basis of Union and, not least, the confession known as the Barmen Declaration which emerged out of the struggle against the Nazis.

The second feature I want to highlight in Peter's Confession are the words '*Son of the Living God.*' Again, on one level, it would be lovely to find shared Christian agreement about an alternative to the masculine specific word 'Son'. Yet, as the Inclusive Bible has found, alternatives are too often either clumsy, or insufficient, or misleading, or all of these things together. The Inclusive Bible for example tends to translate 'Son' as 'Only Begotten', or 'First Born of Creation', which opens up a whole box of other questions: taking us into distant Greek philosophy and Creedal arguments, or into forms of Arian and subordinationist theologies. More importantly, these paraphrases of the original Greek tend to distance us from the extraordinary depth and intimacy of the relationship which we, like Peter and Bonhoeffer, are offered in the God of Jesus.

Remember the authentic biblical meaning of 'confession'? The God of, and in, Jesus which Peter experienced was not some mere category of Greek, or modern, thought. The God of, and in, Jesus, was found in the depths of his life, and in the depths of his relationship with Jesus and the others about to be called 'church'. Peter's confession was born of this, 'seeing like', 'seeing with', and 'seeing out of' his experience of walking with Jesus. Similarly, in Bonhoeffer's writings, whilst others described him in various ways, he said he found his true self, his true depths, in his relationship with God.

For whilst we may honour one another's journeys of self-expression, and articulation of identities, ultimately are these not passing phenomena? Was not Bonhoeffer right in his own conclusion:

*Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once?...*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!*

The third feature I want to highlight also follows on from those words: namely Jesus' naming of Peter and giving of authority to him. The NRSVUE, like most other translations, does not dodge the challenge of the original Greek. As the Roman Church has rightly argued, Peter, the beloved founder of the Church of Rome, does appear to be given particular authority here by Jesus. Personally, I think we should take that seriously. Our historic foundations do matter.

However, it does not follow that this means that the Roman Church thereby has doctrinal and ecclesial authority in all things. Rather, we do well to look at those original Greek words and the playfulness with which Jesus uses them.

I will call you Peter - 'Rock' - he says. We might say 'Rocky' perhaps. Was Jesus partly referring to Peter's appearance do you think?

Surely Jesus was definitely drawing attention to Peter's ambivalent leadership qualities: being both determined and risk-taking, and also fearful and unstable, like a loose rock.

What we see pictured here is surely a representative disciple, and God's extraordinary risk of love.

Like Peter, we too are rocky, yet we too are entrusted with the keys to life, for ourselves and others.

So what confession will we make?

In Jesus' Name, Amen.