

August 27 2017, All Saints
Ordinary Sunday 21
Ex 1:8-2:10, Ps 124, Rom. 12:1-8, Matt. 16:13-20
Who is Jesus for you?

On SBS TV there is a program, “Who do you think you are?” which explores people’s ancestors and the possible effects on their descendants. As Christians, who Jesus is for us, affects our whole lives.

In today’s gospel Jesus first asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They answer giving several possibilities. Some thought Jesus was a sort of re-incarnation of John the Baptist whom Herod had killed, others considered him to be a popular prophet, like Elijah or Jeremiah in the past. Then Jesus asks them collectively, “Who do **you** say that I am?” They have been with Jesus as he travelled around Palestine, they have heard what he said, seen him healing and caring for people, Gentiles as well as Jews. Also he was sometimes mysterious and ‘other’. Finally Simon Peter, who was often the one who spoke first, declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”.

At that moment Peter recognised Jesus both as the Messiah, or the Christ, the one promised by God to lead his people, and as “the Son of the living God”. The disciples had already claimed Jesus to be Son of God when he walked on the water, but now his identity as the Messiah is acknowledged, and the two identities are brought together.

By identifying Jesus as the Christ, or anointed one, the disciples accepted that Jesus was the promised king from the line of David who would lead the Jews out from under the oppressive Roman Rule to freedom and new life. But there is more, it is not just new political life that is promised, but as Son of God, Jesus revealed in his life the reign of God, God’s life of love. This is a life, not just for Jews but for all people, regardless of class, nationality or gender. There is no problem in God’s kingdom with dual citizenship, or one’s gender!

Jesus praises Peter’s dual identification and declares it as coming from God. It is so important, Jesus sees it as a basic faith statement for his followers and later the church, like a firm rock, as well as a nickname for Peter. This amazing revelation is a mountain top experience for the disciples, from which they now come down to earth. First Jesus tells them they are to keep quiet about his identity, and secondly, in the verse immediately following our reading, Jesus foretells he will undergo suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem. His words seem to undermine the identity that has been proclaimed. What it will mean for the disciples is spelt out when Jesus states, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”. These words sound harsh, but the mention of Jesus’ resurrection gives hope, not just at the end of our lives on earth, but daily when we stand up for what we believe is right, die to selfishness and rise to new life in God’s love.

As baptised followers of Jesus, all of us have been called into a close relationship with Jesus. As members of Christ’s body, the church, we are both citizens of this world, and citizens of God’s kingdom. What does this mean for us as Sisters, and for you?

First, let me speak a little about the identity of us who are Sisters, belonging to the Community of the Sisters of the Church. Today, as Linda has said, we are celebrating 125 years since the first Sisters arrived in Australia. It was in 1892 in Hobart, then Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney, and 1901 in Perth. (1892 Madras, 1895 Dunedin and 1910 Christchurch.) Also, about 1892, other Communities of Sisters emerged in Australia. A Sister from a different Anglican Community in England, CSMV, arrived in Brisbane and soon the Society of the Sacred Advent began, chiefly to run schools in Queensland. In Melbourne some Deaconesses living together became the Sisters of the Community of the Holy Name.

This beginning of Communities for women was in response to invitations from Australian Anglican Bishops who were concerned that Church of England children were attending Roman Catholic Schools run by nuns, and wanted an Anglican alternative! Ecumenical relations were not flourishing!

Our Community was begun in London in 1870 by a young woman Emily Ayckbowm, the daughter of an Anglican priest. She was concerned for the poor and worked to improve social conditions, opened homes for orphans and children needing care, and set up schools for poor children. Each Religious Community has a different name, purpose and ethos. Mother Emily stated that our Community was to be one in which the Sisters were called to a life of adoration and action, somewhat like Michael the Archangel, whom she chose as our patron.

In 1892 people in Australia were only familiar with Roman Catholic Sisters running schools, and so they questioned who these Anglican Sisters were, also dressed in long black dresses and black veils, who were starting schools. We were considered suspect by some and accused of being Catholics, but later were accepted.

Monks and Nuns, Brothers and Sisters have been part of the life of the Christian Church since the end of the 3rd Century with Anthony of Egypt and others living lives of prayer and service in solitude and in communities in desert places. Later other forms emerged under leaders such as Benedict in the 6th century and Francis of Assisi and Clare in the 13th century. Monasteries and Convents were closed/dissolved in England by King Henry VIII in the 16th century, but reappeared in the Church of England in the 19th century. Under the influence of the Oxford Movement, the Religious Life was recognised as a valid and valuable expression of the Christian life, along with that of clergy, missionaries, married couples and their families, and single people living out their faith. Although each Religious Community or Order is unique, all witness to the importance of prayer, serving others and physical work. Daily life is usually planned around set times of prayer offered on behalf of others, the church and the world.

Many Communities, like us, take Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Briefly these allow us to give our lives to God to be used in particular ways. **Poverty** is expressed by our money being communal. For example, we who receive pensions put it in the one bank account from which we draw as needed. **Chastity or celibacy** means we do not marry, have husbands or children. But we do experience a type of family life and like others must work at relationships with those we live with, who although not chosen by us become our friends and enrich our lives. We also often experience children in this family. When I worked for 2 or 3 years in our children's home at Broadstairs, England, I cared for one boy about 9 yrs old who was particularly disturbed. He regularly ran away from school, had violent destructive temper tantrums etc. Over the years he has kept in contact with me. He became a lawyer and once visited us at Dondingalong—even joining in singing an item with us here in All Saints Church. We also inherit relationships of earlier Sisters, like that with Maisie Cornelius, Peter's mother. We had a school in Burma, now Myanmar. Maisie's mother died and her father married again to a woman who did not want Maisie. Maisie was a boarder at our school, so she stayed on living with the sisters. They became like a mother to her and she left them only on her Wedding Day. I met her for the first time in Kempsey... She hugged me like a child who had found her lost mother. It was very moving. Peter Cornelius felt a bit like our grandson!

Our vow of **Obedience** influences how we make decisions. In the early days the Sisters who were leaders in the community tended to be autocratic. Now we discern together what is God's will for us.

When I joined the Community, I trained for 3 years in Perth, then travelled to England, where I was professed. (This is when we publicly declare: "I, Sister...promise and vow to the Lord my God that I will live for the rest of my life in Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, under the Rule and

Constitution of the Community of the Sisters of the Church.”)

I was sent to our children’s home in Broadstairs before returning to Sydney and a new venture. Our school in Sydney was sold and a new work, living and working among poorer people began. I sorted dirty clothes in a laundry. With fewer Sisters trained to teach, and 2 dying young from cancer, our schools in other cities were taken over by others. They are flourishing today and we still have some contact with them. In the 1970s I went for 6 months to our house in Belfast where Fiona lived during the “troubles”. In 1978, we opened a House of Prayer at Dondingalong where groups and individuals came for retreats or rest. Days for children took place in school holidays, and a free residential program, ‘An Exploration in Living’ was held each year for women. Sisters from the Solomon Islands also came to share our life and learn English etc.. In South Kempsey, we are today engaged in prayer, pastoral work and producing educational leaflets etc.

Our life is different from yours, but all of us are called to give our lives to God, to worship God and serve others. As members of Christ’s body, the church, we are to support and encourage each other in what we do. When we Sisters responded to God’s call, it was not always what we would have chosen for ourselves! But God has a way of insisting, as you may have discovered in your life. I personally do not regret my vocation to be a Sister.

All Christians are called to follow Jesus by living in the world and also living under the reign of God’s love. We Sisters express it in a particularly way, witnessing outwardly to its importance by our clothes and a ring on the right hand. You express it in your various ways. All of us, with our weaknesses and strengths, experience suffering, but also new life, as God’s love challenges us, develops and grows in us. Although we sometimes fail, we are strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit to keep going, (we are ‘touched by God’s breath’, as I read recently,) often through others. As members of Christ’s body in Kempsey, with our different gifts and dual citizenship, we together follow Jesus, who for us is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God”.

You may like to pray during the time of reflection:

‘Lord, in the quiet of my soul, place there your precious gift of faith; Take my care, give me new hope to make my life your own.’ Christopher Walker.

Sister Helen CSC.