

It occurs to me that we most often start to get to know other people, particularly public figures, based on what other people say about them. These days, with the flow of information moving the way it does, it is often hard to get an opinion on someone or some movement without having to slog through a whole bunch of information, some of which is true, and much of which is not, and a lot of which may be opinion rather than fact, and then you're into having to judge which opinion you value over another, hopefully you have enough objective reality to form a good opinion of your own.

It may have involved fewer emojis and memes in the first century, but public opinion was an important thing then as well. It would be a mistake to impose our modern, American sense of individualism on this story, to say that it doesn't matter what people think. The cultural world that Jesus lived in cared very much what other people thought. The cult of what everybody knows was not only powerful (as it remains today) but it was not even challenged. We run into this over and over again on the underbelly of the stories: everybody knows what sort of person this woman is, everybody knows that these people Jesus is eating with are sinners and wretches.

So the opinion of "the people" is not just something to be blown off and mocked. As it turns out some of "the people" have some pretty impressive ideas about Jesus, but the thing is, none of them appear to agree with any one particular idea, they just know he's different, and different in a very particular way, different the way prophets are different. To this day, one of the most acceptable ways to talk about Jesus with people of different faiths is to focus on his similitude with prophets. Islam, in fact, accepts that Jesus is a prophet on a very similar footing with Mohammed, and Mohammed only really "wins" because he came later and gave them the Koran.

Almost nobody, even atheists, would really be able to argue with you if you said Jesus was a prophet. He fits the bill pretty well. So apparently "everyone" wasn't exactly wrong. The thing is though, they weren't entirely right either. There is more to Jesus' identity than just a man who speaks for God. In fact, there is something that even Peter and the disciples don't have words for just yet, so Peter uses the best words he has: "Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Neither one of these was necessarily an unheard of formulation. The Messiah was a pretty popular idea at the time, there had been several people who had tried to claim that title, and no shortage of speculation about who and what the messiah would be when he arrived. Son of God also was not unheard of, powerful conquerors and kings would often claim divinity for themselves. These answers that Peter gives are not, in and of themselves, the truth of who Jesus is, but they get us on the right track, they get us on the track that points beyond what most people can imagine and towards something more.

They are yet a revelation. They are given to Peter by God, they do not come from his own awareness and that is step one. Putting together the Messiah, which means "anointed one" and Son of the Living God, gets at the identity of Jesus, as being something more than just a prophet, more than just a wise teacher, more than just a healer or a priest of some sort. It would actually take some time before the church would actually fully articulate the notion of the Incarnation, God becoming human. It was not something that Jesus ever actually said, or that would have been at all credible this side of the resurrection. Peter goes about as far as his language and human reason will allow him to go. That's why he is the rock, specifically the Petros, the bedrock, not the lithos (as in more movable stones).

What Jesus says next should absolutely perk up our ears, because it is a promise and a commission. Peter gets the words for the identity, there is still so much more to learn about what those words mean. This is one of the times where Jesus uses the word Ekklesia, which is the word that we translate into church. As a matter of fact, the word church is used only three times by Jesus, all in Matthew's Gospel. Here and in chapter 18, when he talks about how to deal with problems within the church. These uses actually come across as pretty anachronistic when we think about Jesus teaching his disciples, they foreshadow a reality that doesn't actually come to pass while Jesus is physically present.

The core reality of the community that Jesus was describing would have been pretty foreign to Peter and the disciples, who still seem to be thinking about Jesus as a worldly savior, ascendant king sort of figure. The most they could really have understood is that Jesus was the one who was going to restore Israel, usher in the age of Zion or something along those lines. Jesus doesn't actually challenge that here, he uses triumphal language like giving Peter the keys to the Kingdom and telling them that they have the authority to bind and loose, but he also tells them to keep this stuff between them. I think there's a lot going on here that needs a bit of unpacking, but it starts with the knowledge that Jesus' vision for his Messianic destiny and for his Ekklesia is rather different than what his disciples are angling for. They can know and confess and believe, but the reality is that they have very little idea what they're actually getting into.

Eventually, after a good while, centuries in some estimation, the church would come to understand that the earthly life, death and resurrection of Jesus was an incarnation (there's that word again) of what God was doing in all of creation. Incarnation means taking on flesh and physical form. What God was doing, is doing and will do is all part of who Jesus is. It did not begin with his birth and it does not end with his death, and this pattern of incarnation is given to us, the Ekklesia, the church, the Body of Christ, to continue and to live out. Peter is the foundation of this, he is being formed and shaped by his time with and his love for Jesus. Peter is impetuous and can often be wrong, but he is also the pattern, we all follow in one way or another. We are most right, when God's Spirit acts in us and through us and when we focus on our Lord, and we are most wrong when we try to do things our way and our way only.

The fact that Peter was the archetype for what the church is supposed to be can be rather hopeful or rather discouraging depending on how you look at it. Peter had the ability to do amazing things, like step out on faith, as we saw a few weeks ago. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he would not sink. But Peter can also be Satan, when he wants to deny the path of the cross. He can also get scared and deny he ever knew Jesus when he fears for his life. In other words, Peter is not perfect. If your definition of the Messiah, the Son of the Living God says that Jesus is going to lead bright shining armies of heaven against all that is wicked and evil then you might wonder how he has a place for the likes of Peter, or us for that matter. If you think that the Kingdom of Heaven is all about shiny, happy people then you might think the church that you know is sort of well... failing. If you think that the reign of Christ is going to dominate, purge and purify the world, you would be tempted to start trying to label and segregate all sorts of wicked people.

But if you know that Peter is the rock upon which this is built, and that these startlingly ordinary followers of Jesus were given power to forgive sins and to bind and to loose things... If you realize that the keys of the kingdom were given to such a rag-tag group of misfits who quite obviously had a seriously imperfect grasp on what Jesus was always on about... Well maybe your expectations need

some adjustment, and I think you'll find if you make that adjustment things start to come in a little more clearly.

Keep this in mind as we ordain some of our folks to be Elders of this church, and keep it in mind when it comes to me or you or any of the leaders in this church, we are built on the bedrock of Peter, meaning that we can be both Holy and broken. We do this work, we engage in this ministry we are disciples of Jesus and we are part of his body, but we are not perfect. Every question we answer, every vow we take will only be fulfilled by the grace and help of God's Holy Spirit as the incarnation continues in us and through us.