

MATTHEW 16: 13-20

Who do you say that I am?

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Brothers and Sisters, all. Matthew's Gospel we would agree, warmly focusses on Jesus' pastoral heart. In his dialogue with Peter, Jesus builds his relationship as a heart to heart. We note, that Jesus looks beyond Peter's failures, his at times cowardice, his impetuosity – Jesus asks of Peter that probing question – 'Who do you say that I am?'

When in boarding school all those years ago at Geelong, under the care of the Christian Brothers. I experienced in them, qualities in Leadership that shared compassion, wisdom, prayer and challenge. Often I recall those days, and in particular, the moving story of one of the boys who came to us via a different channel – as 'Ward of State'. We were encouraged to become his peers, his friend, his colleague and to share the life and harmony of our school. I'll call him Brian (this was not his name). All too soon, Brian became highly unpopular, he was obnoxious, always angry, fighting, swearing, unkind and mean. It was clear he didn't want to be with us, and the feeling was haltingly mutual among us. No-one wanted him to stay. But, one wise and caring Christian Brother looking long and caringly with his compassionate heart, wanted to know more about Brian. Going to his file, he learnt from whence he came and, with the permission of Brother Superior, went to Brian's hometown located in a far off distant place in country Victoria.

Going to the local Parish Priest, Brother learnt how things had gone so badly in young Brian's early life. With a saddened heart the Parish Priest spoke of Brian's family situation, his Father an aggressive and angry chronic alcoholic, his Mother, so unloved and abused at home, became a lady in the street. Brian after being laughed at and mocked by his peers at school for always arriving in dirty and smelly clothes, turned to truancy. Brian would spend long days in the streets, he would take milk bottles and the money left out for the milkman from his neighbours steps, raid their letter boxes, cast the mail in all directions and bring attention to himself through his anti-social behaviour.

The police were alerted and, after many efforts to help – Brian was brought before the children's courts, there he was made a 'Ward of State 'and assigned to the Tuarana disciplinary center in Melbourne. The Christian Brothers hearing his story appealed for him to come into their care, and being successful on appeal Brian came to Geelong. Yes, those first months with us were hard, as we witnessed his many outbursts, his many tears, but very patiently, this kind Brother saw to Brian's counselling in ongoing care programs – Slowly, Brian's suspicions and rejection of everyone turned into trust, his heart of hatred, turned into love and care, his lack of faith into a growing prayerful relationship with his God. Through it all, Brian began to appreciate he was loved and loveable and, he began to believe in himself. Brian experienced as I believe Peter the Apostle experienced in his encounter with Jesus in our Gospel today, that, he was valued for who he was.

Once these counselling and healing steps came through, Brian experienced acceptance and encouragement, respect and love from his peers – everyone rejoiced with him as he became

an achiever in his studies, in sport and, he was accepted socially among us. His talents gave him responsibilities. Leadership positions given him, and when gaining his VCE some years after his arrival among us at Geelong, all rejoiced at what love and at what insightful care can achieve. Those remarkable words from Nelson Mandela could well be attributed as words taking place in Brian's heart too 'My greatest enemy was not those who put or kept me in prison. It was myself, I was afraid to be who I am.'

Brian learned to believe in himself. Brian became purposeful, he chose Policing as his vocation and in his turn looked out for dysfunctional families and children in similar circumstances to his own, doing marvellous work for victims, especially the abused and rejected among young people. His gifts, - he grew in confidence that called him into leadership achieving the position of Senior Sergeant, a responsibility in which he was admired a position he held over many years he is now retired over some years now.

It's a great story, it's everyone's story, as, in Matthew's Gospel today we are to let Jesus speak to our hearts and in turn we are to meet Jesus Heart to Heart. We Experience the joy of being called to be his disciple and in that call we rejoice that we are entrusted with responsibilities – responsibilities that will effect many around us, be it through our parish life, our workplaces or in our families. Remember the Peter who said in answer to the question 'who do you say that I am?' said in reply 'You are the Christ' is that same Peter who would say in another setting 'I do not know the man'. This tells us that there was a division within Peter, just as there is a division with each of us. We recognise our high and low moments – sometimes letting our low moments get the better of us. Jesus points to our high moments, he draws them out in us – these high moments are to work for the Lord.

Good words of advice stay with us - such as – a Brother saying to me having put me in charge of our Dormitory (and failing miserably) he asked for me to do an essay including this sentence: 'Responsibility given to one seen to be Responsible, must be carried out Responsibly.' It was a good exercise. These words remained with me throughout my life as a priest – they remain a constant challenge helping me in facing many questions on my leadership in Parish Life, in service and care for all throughout the governance and spiritual growth and needs of all parishioners.

Yes, Matthew 16: 13-20 is a great Gospel: Jesus in his heart to heart understanding of Peter, teaches us, that low moments in the lives of others should not cause us to put them down or, to write them off. We are to believe that their good moments will help us appreciate their potential and, we are to affirm them and encourage them always.

Sadly, of ourselves, we might admit, we have been to hasty to speak our criticisms and in doing so have remained reluctant to give a single word of encouragement. There are so many out there - waiting for our words of encouragement and appreciation – which never come which never come. It is us, they want to hear it from!

Peter had his faults, they were obvious. I'm often saddened to hear first comments about another person – as comments tearing them apart/ discrediting them. My own wish is to hear from us all, words that appreciate, that affirm, that build up. The reality is in considering what people are not, we overlook what they are.'

Peter showed his strengths for leading – “You are Peter and on this Rock I will build my Church.” In speaking these words to Peter, Jesus also directs these same words to us as his Disciples.’

Our call is to be Christlike as we look deeply into each others 'heart,' finding the good in everyone, generously revealing it, and , patiently bringing it out – as the Story of Brian affirms and as Peter experienced through Jesus loving encounter with him and with each of us. May the good Lord who began this good work in you, bring it to fulfilment. Amen