

**Sermon preached on 25th October 2016 during the induction service of Rev Dr Andre Groenewald - as
new minister at Balerno Parish Church of Scotland**



Thank you for the opportunity to share God's Word during this special occasion - you have made me a happy man. I know I have a short time to share God's word with you and that I am still learning to limit my sermons to 15 minutes. You know it is not a good thing to give a microphone to an African preacher - then ask him to preach for a very short time. Anyway, we better get cracking. Let's pray...

Prayer - May these words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

Because I am going talk about a momentous confession - I guess it is fitting that begin with a relatively insignificant confession of my own. Like many Christians in Africa, I come to the Christian faith through the avenue of innocent but passionate African biblical hermeneutics - characterised mainly by a notorious conviction and indeed confession that:

'Jesus Christ is Emmanuel - God with us. He is who the Bible says He is and He can do what the Bible says He can do.'

Unsurprisingly, and again like many other Christians, the one question that influenced my faith journey, especially my growing relationship with Jesus Christ - is one Jesus asked his disciples in the first part of the text that was read for us beautifully? Who do you say I am?

This is the one question that everyone who encounters the good news of Jesus, in one form or another, must face... who is Jesus?

I also know that the definitions of Jesus around us abound!

- Some say Jesus is God in a human body;
- others say he was a great prophet, teacher and healer,
- some say he was a good-man - but he was not divine;
- some say he is a fictional character;
- others believe he is irrelevant in this modern age;
- some believe that Jesus is the one who can and will make you fabulously wealthy;
- still others think he is their property alone,
- and on the side there are those, and they are many, who although they have faith in Christ - they don't see Church as part of that faith.

Steve Aisthorpe calls them Churchless Christians.

As we go through life, as we step in and out of the confines of these beautiful walls - we hear these definitions of Christ. We hear his name mentioned as a swear word or in a desperate cry for help.

But I pray that there will be more people especially in this parish, during the next phase of your life and work, who will share with Apostle Peter the confession that Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God.

Nothing, nothing at all gives Christ more joy than this confession, this double God-breathed revelation - that the son of the living God came to save and serve. What a joy, what a privilege to hear people confess, in their own way, in a familiar setting and at the right time, that Jesus is their Christ.

That great confession is the basic reality of the Christian faith. Leading Bible teachers who have reflected on this portion of scripture, in a wee bit more detail, tell us that Jesus spent two and half years preparing his disciples for this epic moment.

As His earthly ministry was drawing to a close, with the cross becoming more visible on the horizon, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that Jesus guided his disciples and, at the right time, he brought them to the outskirts of this pre-dominantly non-Jewish city of Caesarea Philippi, away from

- the clamouring of misguided Jewish multitudes who saw in Jesus a leader of their desired revolt against Rome,
- and away from the political and religious leaders who saw him as a threat to their security

In other words, the surroundings of this city served as the ideal quiet location for Jesus to ask this question - who do you say that I am?

There is one other reason that made this place an ideal location for asking this question - it was, strangely, an area of intense religious activity.

It was awash with temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Church historians tell us that at the time of Jesus, as many as fourteen such temples would have littered the landscape.

Close to these pagan temples, was a massive cave with a bottomless pit filled with water, some call it the gates of hades. - but the locals viewed it as a natural abode for the gods - an area of intense religious activity - an epitome of the underworld. This is where Jesus brought his disciples to ask them that epic question - who do you say I am?

I like to imagine a silent, soul-searching moment in the group

- as the disciples pondered that question of Jesus' identity;

- as they allowed their faith to take them beyond their experiences of the prophets who had come before him.

Then Peter, in his role as spokesperson for the others, finds words for what was going on in that silence – and says, "You are the Messiah – the son of the living God."

This is the moment – this is the answer – this is the confession that Jesus was waiting for. May be, it was not even said with the confidence it deserved. But once it was said (with the help of God himself) the job was done, – the test was passed and what remained was for Jesus to seal it with a pronouncement of his own – for the benefit of all in his church.

He said, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

I will spare you my thoughts of what he meant by the word rock to mean – save for the suggestion that there is a sense in which the church could be enriched – but not, as has been the case, divided by all the entrenched cultural interpretations of this verse (ie. Peter as the rock, the rock of revelation and Christ the Rock)

But the only comment I will make here is this – when Jesus said – 'I will build my church on this rock' – I am %100 certain that there was one rock he was not referring to – and that was the rock, in the picture above, at the foot of Mount Hermon where (again if church historians are correct) Jesus brought his disciples to ask them this question – who do you say I am? That rock was not the foundation and nothing or activity on it would stand in the way of his church – then or today. I picture him staring straight at the rock and all the religious activity on it and declaring – that no gods, no cave, grave no hell in any form then and now – past, present or future – would stand in the way of his church.

- I know The Church may seem at times to be weak, divided, discouraged and ineffective.
- I know that in our day and in many places including here, the community of Christian believers is suffering significant decline...

but I refuse to stand with people who give up – because, Andre, Christ committed himself to building his church and he invites us to join him – not on a preservation site, or a demolition site – but on a building site. Yes, on a building site

Not I have built, or I might build – But I will build my church my church. The master builder is at work and invites us to join him in this great and ongoing work. Jesus is committed to his bride, the church – the community of believers on earth - and He invites us to do the same.

One way Jesus invites us to join him in this great work that is by bringing us out to meet with him on our own Caesarea Philippi – then sending us out... saying to all of us, go, in my name, and make disciples of all nations. Go and model me in the places where you live, worship and work.

We call it the great commission - some call it the great omission. Hudson Taylor - the founder of China Inland Mission - now renamed Overseas Mission - had a timely reminder for us all

'The great commission - the going out - is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed"

In fact, by asking us to go out, Jesus is in effect asking us to join him out there. We do not take him into the communities - that is an old and tired way of thinking - but we join him in the mission field at local, national or international levels.

For us here, Christ commands us to go - beginning at our door steps. When he says go, in effect come and join me in the community - as you Christians in this parish have done well for a long time.

He says come out and see what I see behind the closed doors - the celebrations, the hurts the pains, the brokenness.

Maybe in the next phase of your ministry here - and Christ the builder is saying to you Go out and stay out... or to put in another way, come out and stay out... do not be worried about the future... and nothing will stand in the way.

Let me end with a plea - and again I know that for you here it is a timely reminder... Based on the words of Carl Henry

The gospel of Jesus the Christ, the son of the living God is good news to the people in our communities - But it can only be good news to them if it gets out and gets there in time!

We cannot afford not to go - and if we do, it will not be unlikely that we will be rewarded with even one person - saying 'Jesus is my messiah - and he sure is the son of the living God. I will build my church... nothing will stand in the way - there come out, let's be church 'without walls' even in these parts.