

What does it mean to be a member of the Church?

So, you stumble across our website and you think, I would like to be part of this but what do I have to do? What constitutes membership of a church?

In our passage today there are three responsibilities that I would like to highlight.

- Personal responsibility
- Communal responsibility
- God's responsibility

So, let us begin with a personal responsibility.

Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a town in northern Judea. The name tells you a lot about the town. It was very much part of Rome, called after Caesar, and it was ruled by Philip who was a brother of Herod. In this town there was a large white marble Temple dedicated to the divinity of Caesar, it was also home to the worship of the nature god Pan – so it was a place where religion was upheld, albeit far from the Jewish idea, and far from Christ's Kingdom. But it is to this place of many different gods, that Jesus brings his group of twelve, to perhaps stand under the mountain of where the pantheon of gods was worshipped and ask them the question, *who do people say that I am?* This is another building block in their faith. The Gospel of Matthew has been story after story of Jesus teaching the disciples and expanding their knowledge of the Kingdom, and now as he prepares to go to Jerusalem for the last time, he asks them the ultimate question, *who do people say that I am?*

In the midst of the worship of many gods, Jesus is wanting to see if any of them have even a glimmer of light as to who Jesus is.

Their response is colourful and they tell him: some say... John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah. You are being named amongst Israel's greats – not by all but certainly by the common people. Some think that John has come back from the dead, Elijah the great prophet who they thought would return before the end of the age, or Jeremiah, who was also supposed to come back at the end of time.

But Jesus isn't content with this answer, he probes further...he probes into their hearts. He wants to know what they think, not what Joe Bloggs down the road thinks. *But who do you say that I am?*

Here is the ultimate question of the Christian faith. The door of faith turns on this hinge – *who do you say that Jesus is?*

This question is really the one in which membership becomes real for the one who answers it. If Jesus asked you this question today, *who do you say I am?* What would you say?

Top marks to Peter, he was on top form the day that he answered Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Christianity never consists in knowing about Jesus; it always consists in knowing Jesus.

Christ means *Anointed One*, and *Son of the Living God* is the highest form of divinity that anyone could have.

In a town where Caesar was worshipped as God, Peter makes the astonishing profession of faith, that Jesus is the anointed Son of God.

In this statement of faith lies the seed of the church. *Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonas, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven.*

Being a Christian is about following Christ. It was in Antioch that they were first called Christians, because they followed the Anointed One – the Christ. A personal faith is essential for membership. Being a member of a church is not like being a member of a gym or a sports club, it's about a personal relationship with Christ.

Peter was yet to understand what Christ was going to do for the world on the cross – take the sin of the world on his shoulders – he was yet to understand what would happen three days later after His death – He would rise to eternal life and bring the hope of eternity into the world.

But with his limited knowledge he was still able to make a personal declaration of faith, *you are Christ son of the Living God.*

How would we respond to Jesus' question? Nail your colours to the mast today. What is your response to Jesus? Can you call him the Anointed One, can you call him the Son of the Living God?

The second responsibility belongs to the church.

Jesus says to him, *you are Peter and, on this rock, I will build my Church.* The church is the gathering of God's people. When we have faith in the Anointed One, the Son of the Living God, we will want to be part of His Church. We will want to praise his name; we will want to pray to him and learn about him and love him, and we will want to be with like minded people, and so the best place to go is where God's people meet, and that is the church.

Jesus said to them, *I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.* The twelve apostles were to be the key holders of the early church. Jesus is passing on responsibility to them.

I remember vividly at my ordination in 1999 the Rev John Harvey was the minister who inducted me into my first charge, and he did something very symbolic at my ordination, he handed me the keys of the church. He entrusted to me the keys that open the doors and this is a great privilege for Christian ministers that they are literally the key holders of the church, and what goes on with the Sanctuary falls heavily on their shoulders, and it's along these lines that Jesus is saying to the disciples, *I'm giving you the keys of the Kingdom*, you are going to take the reins, you are going to take responsibility and what happens on earth will be established in heaven.

You see, Jesus is going to leave them, He knows this. Are they responsible to take over and be his co-workers in the church.

This is indeed what happened. After Jesus was crucified, resurrected and ascended into heaven, the disciples waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit, which was the Spirit of Jesus, to mobilise them and to send them out to be the ones who open the kingdom of heaven for others.

The church was going to be built on the profession of Peter, *you are the Christ, the Anointed One – Son of the Living God.*

You see, when we strip the church back and take away all the man-made traditions and lay it bare for all to see, the important thing, the really important thing, is not spectacular buildings or gold altars or stained glass windows, as beautiful as they may be, and as an aid to worshipping God they most definitely are, the most important aspect is the profession of faith, *you are the Son of the Living God.*

For this is the key to building the church. This is the key that the disciples are given. Peter had this key in his heart. It was revealed to him by His Father in Heaven and this is the key that we still have, this is the key for folks to enter into the holiest of places.

The key of the Kingdom is Christ. Jesus said *enter in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate that leads to hell.* He said, *I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be saved.*

The ultimate question again is this, have we entered through the gate of the Church which is Christ himself? He laid down his life that we might be saved and brought into his fold.

When we are in the Church, the church has a responsibility to us. The disciples were entrusted with the keys to enter into the Kingdom. They were also entrusted to plant churches, to be shepherds, teachers, preachers and evangelists. But their real task was to enable the congregation to do ministry.

Christ builds his church, through his members. Each member has a responsibility. We are not called into the church to be waited upon, we are called to serve, and to be the church to those within and without. To be the church to those who are seeking and searching, and to reflect the light of Christ in our communities. That's how Jesus builds the church.

Membership involves a personal response of faith but it also involves being part of a community and serving Jesus within the community.

Thirdly and finally, membership depends on God.

Jesus said *I will build my church.* We must always remember that the church is not Peter's church or anyone else's church. The Church is to be built upon Jesus Christ. He will build his Church, that's his promise to us, but we need to build on the right

foundation. If we choose another foundation, that of gold or silver or straw, said Paul, then that will be tested and found wanting.

Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. He's talking about the true church; the church that is built on the foundation of Peter's profession. The church that is built on Christ. Hell will not destroy this because it is indestructible. Jesus has won the victory over sin and evil on the cross, and so the battle has been won, and the church is already triumphant. Yes, churches will close and congregations will close, but the church of Christ will continue, and new churches will emerge, and people will be brought into the Kingdom. Why? Because it's God's responsibility. He will never give up on His Church and He will always be searching for people who are like Peter, who are willing and wanting to respond to the ultimate question – *who do people say that I am?*

The gates of hell will never destroy the church. This verse is a great comfort to God's people because, despite the attacks that the church often faces, there is a promise here which will help us through, that Christ is building His church upon the confession of faith of Peter. Any church that is built on this confession will never fail. But if we wander from this confession, if we substitute our Christian faith with alternative theories or ideas, then this church will not last.

With all his flaws Peter was a true-hearted, fervent, single-minded servant of Christ; with all his imperfections he has given us a model of discipleship that we would do well to follow. Despite his instability, his thrice denial of Christ – Jesus sees in Peter someone who will be a leader in the church and someone whom he could trust to take the Gospel forward.

So, I started with this question and I would like to finish with this question today, *who do people say that I am?*

This is the beginning of the church and it doesn't start with a building or even a congregation; it begins with a confession of faith: *you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*

This is where we begin to build a church, it is all about Christ. He is the head of the Church, he is the corner stone, and our profession of faith brings us to Christ.

You want to be a member of Christ's Church? You want to follow Him and be his disciple? Well are you ready to answer this question, *who do people say that I am?*

Only you can answer his question.

I remember being challenged with this question forty years ago – it took me about 6 months of soul searching before I could honestly say, *you are the Son of the Living God.* But when I did, I knew in my heart that it was the best decision that I ever made, and that my life would never be the same again.