

ST PETER June 2016

Somebody coming back from a trip to America recently recounted the difficulty they had – ordering a sandwich at lunch time!

It was in a sandwich bar where they were made fresh according to order. A sandwich cheese, ham and mayonnaise was ordered. The first question back was ‘What kind of bread?’ ‘Er White’ was the answer. And then came a rigmarole ‘ We have rye-wheat, wholegrain, pumpernickel, herb/tomato & basil, and so it went on. The choices were more than the visitor could cope with!

When Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples, his simple question ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ was answered with multiple responses – ‘Some say Elijah, others Jeremiah, others some of the prophets.’ Their replies are circumspect, cautious, 3rd hand, giving nothing away about their own opinions and beliefs.

But just like the visitor in the sandwich bar, they were asked to make up their mind, there and then. ‘Who do YOU say that I am?’

Jesus was looking to see how committed they were to him and the Gospel he was preaching. It was a pivotal time in his ministry. He was preparing to go to Jerusalem, where, as he went on to tell them, there would be trouble, opposition, persecution and most likely his own death. He had to know where they for him or not. What they had so far experienced in Galilee was a proverbial vicarage tea party compared to what lay ahead. Would they be up to it and would they remain faithful? Choices had to be made. Opinions were not going to be enough. Jesus was looking for commitment to him and his Gospel message. Would they stick with him and by him through thick and thin?

Someone once said that this pivotal passage emphasises the difference between having an opinion about Jesus and actually being a follower, and they went on to say that “it exposes the potential gap between rhetoric and reality, between knowledge and faith.”

Winston Churchill who seldom went to church was asked about his faith and he replied, “I can hardly be regarded as a pillar of the church, for I hardly ever go. But I am a buttress, insofar as I support the church from outside!”

Jesus was looking for the disciples to move from outside to inside, from opinion to commitment, from knowledge to faith.

And it was Peter who grasped what Jesus was getting at, as he declared “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Peter was prepared to make a commitment. He was nailing his colours to the mast. He was saying yes to Jesus.

And as such he sets the headline for Christian discipleship.

And Jesus goes on to say that Peter will be the foundation stone for the new church Jesus is establishing. I like the way one translation has put this:-

“Peter, you are the first person to grasp who I am; you are therefore the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the church I am founding.” And it follows that ever since, everyone who makes the same discovery and makes a choice to follow Christ is another and another stone added into the church of Jesus.

God is always the one who gives us choices rather than trying to force us one way or another.

As he gave the first disciples the choice at Caesarea Philippi to follow or to leave him, so with regard to God and his church we always have choices to make – to be a pillar inside or a buttress outside, to just have an opinion or to make a wholehearted commitment, to turn “rhetoric to reality and knowledge to faith.”

May we always make the choice that Peter made.