**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’  And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’  He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’  Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’

And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

What can I say about Peter that hasn’t already been said? A bit of trivia first: have you ever wondered why so many weather vanes have a cockerel on top? They were often situated on church spires because they were the highest points around and therefore eminently suitable for the purpose of checking wind direction. But in the ninth century, Pope Nicholas decreed that all churches should have the symbol of the cock on the steeple as a reminder of Peter's denial. There is a church in London which has his keys instead, but the message remains the same.

Who do **we** say that Jesus is? There are issues of identity threaded right through this gospel passage this morning. Not just about who Jesus is, but also about who the disciples are.

And they are issues which abound in other parts of the bible too: the apostle Paul is also concerned: using the different gifts given to each member, and also about finding or forging a new identity, as members of the body of Christ.

As some of you know, I have long had a fascination for the religious life, by which I mean the lives lived within religious communities. We visited a Carthusian monastery a few years ago in France, and I did a lot of reading about Carthusians and their way of life for a while. And when we did our Lent course on the topic of Prayer, we had a talk by Rebecca, a friend of mine, on Ignatian prayer – as practised by the Jesuits and others. And one of the key things that has allowed the Jesuits to flourish as an Order for nearly 500 years is that their first focus is not on what they do, but on who they are.

Mission is rooted in self-awareness – understanding personal strengths, weaknesses, values, one’s world-view even. Before we can begin to understand who Jesus is, perhaps we need to know who we are as people.

Jesus’ question: Who do you say that I am? was not a test, with the only correct answer being: Messiah. Indeed, had we read further on from that passage, we would have seen that Peter’s answer was only partly right. What he at that stage had not grasped was what it would mean to be Messiah – this Messiah would not be a conquering hero, but a suffering servant, who would die in the cause. (and later of course, Peter himself would be martyred – and, declaring himself, moreover, unworthy of the same death as his Master, would die on a cross, but head down).

Had anyone asked Jesus that question: Who are you? in chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel, I’m not sure he would have been able to answer. Let us remember that in the earlier chapters, Jesus had heard God’s voice calling him beloved. Then he had been driven into the wilderness and been tested by the devil to understand himself in relation to God. He had repeatedly gone off by himself to be and become a person shaped in prayer.

And so it seems to me that part of what Jesus did, and part of our own calling in Christ, is to understand self-knowledge as part of our mission. Self-awareness, knowing ourselves, helps us to relate to God. So we need to hear this question less in terms of a definitive statement about Jesus and more in terms of relationship. Who are we in relation to Jesus.

Those who practise the Ignatian examen, the prayer of self-examination, at least twice a day, ask things like:
· God, when did I sense your presence most strongly in the last hours?
· When did your presence seem farthest away from me?
· How were you loving me in this most recent time?
· How were you loving me even when your presence seemed far away?
· How did I respond to your love?

This discipline is used by AA and other Step movements in the process of recovery from addiction. This inventory of ourselves, as one person called it, helps us to become conscious of our current identity, but also helps to form a new one.

 I mentioned last week that the Church of England, and specifically the Diocese of Chelmsford, although I know we won’t be the only ones, is seeking to find new and different ways of ministering to parishes and communities, because we cannot sustain, on the basis of current income, the number of paid clergy that we have at present.

That means that we all have to, yes, consider what we can afford to give to the church, but also and more importantly to my mind, consider who we are as the Church, and who Jesus is to us.

Our mission as Church is to love, welcome, nurture, and serve all people – including those who never come into the building - by following the example of Jesus Christ. And to do that effectively, we have to know ourselves, our challenges as well as our gifts.

A priest in charge/vicar/rector is not someone who ‘does’ all the ministering – and I know that you all know that. We come back to using the individual gifts we each have, to the best of our ability, in ministering to others. Some of you have far greater giftings than I have in the field of taking pastoral care of others; **most** of you have far greater giftings than I have in the field of administration; some of you – and likely a number I haven’t actually found out about yet – have gifts for preaching and teaching, and for leading worship.

So, in this new way of being Church that we are beginning to explore, we are going to need lay people, or I should say more lay people – people not ordained as priests – in all of those roles, not just the behind the scenes ones. Not because St Peter’s is in danger of losing its priest, but because there are other local communities which may well be in that danger and this conversation needs to be had across the board. Who are you? And who is Jesus to you?

Remember, if you will, how Peter was sitting outside in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was inside being interrogated. A maidservant came up and asked him if it was true that he was a follower of this man who was at the root of all the trouble. And Peter said: I do not know the man. I do not even know who he is.

It was a denial certainly – the denial Jesus himself had predicted. And the cock crowed.

But it was also the truth. Peter really didn’t know who Jesus was – any more than any of us really knows. Whatever we **can** find to say about him, and whatever we articulate of what we believe about him, he remains always just beyond our grasp – maybe just, once in a while, we catch the hem of his garment. We can love him and learn from him and follow his teachings – and seek him in his Church, in his Gospels and in each other - but we will only truly find him right at the end.

There is a legend that while in Rome, and hearing about Nero's attempt to arrest and crucify him, Peter walked out of the city gate, intending to leave, to run away - only to see a vision of Christ in front of him. He asked Jesus: domine quo vadis? Lord where are you going? And Jesus answered: I am going to be crucified again.

After the vision ended, Peter understood that he was to stay in Rome and continue Christ’s ministry there.
That is Peter, in whose name our church is dedicated. Peter who lived a life of faith and doubt, who made mistakes, big ones, but who followed Christ’s calling for him to the bitter end.

And Peter's call to discipleship, is no different from our own call to discipleship. Like Peter, we will do it well sometimes, and we will fumble and mess it up a lot too. But through it all, we need to keep asking: domine, quo vadis? Lord, where are you going. And then follow. **Amen**