

**“Why do I still follow Jesus?” a sermon based on Matthew 16:13-20, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on Sunday 27 August 2017.**

In the readings today, Jesus asks questions: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Who do you say that I am? Questions can put us on the spot.

At the end of public lectures at the university, people often ask questions. Despite my best efforts, I rarely think of one. If I do, I gather my courage, put up my hand, the microphone is passed, I come out in a cold sweat, embarrassed. Most often I think of a question ten minutes later.

James Haire, an Irishman, Australian theologian, introduced two speakers at a Conference. One was British, the other American. He said: I have heard many British speakers and American speakers. I have learned, he said, that Americans think best walking up and down. British people think best sitting down. Irish people, he said, think best afterwards. We rely on people like Peter, who seem to think faster and speak sooner.

Frederick Buechner is a writer and speaker. He talks of a time he was put on the spot.

He tells of how he grew up among people who thought of themselves as sophisticated. Urbane people, many fancied themselves too mature to engage in anything resembling traditional pious talk about God or spirituality. Indeed, when as a young man Buechner mentioned at a high class dinner party that he was going to seminary to become a minister, his host for the evening fixed Buechner in an incredulous gaze before asking, “A minister? Really. Tell me, was this your own idea or were you ill-advised?” Many years later, Buechner taught a semester at a theological college. At lunch one day, sitting with some students, he overheard one student casually ask another, “What has God been doing in your life lately?” Buechner observed that if a question like that was asked in New York, the ground would open up, buildings would crumble, and grown men would faint.

But times are changing.

Ten years ago an organisation started called the Sydney Alliance. It brings together religious and community organisations and unions for the common good - a great diversity of people. Now with thousands of participants. Before they plan action, they build relationships. The first step is to learn how to relate and listen to each other. They begin by having conversations. The Moderator of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church found himself paired with the leader of the Union movement in NSW – a man known for making fervent speeches and organising protests. This man told

him of what motivated him, and he spoke of what he hoped for and what he believed. And, the Moderator said, here was I a religious man, learning from a leader of the union movement how to talk about my faith.

Times are changing.

People of other faiths are often intrigued as to what we believe and why and how we came to believe. Times I have been asked to account for my faith is among Muslim people in inter-faith conversations. In a cultural and religiously diverse nation it is more natural to ask – so why do you follow Jesus?

Times are changing.

Miroslav Volf, the Yale theologian, says that a secular democracy is not about excluding religion. It is about not privileging one religion over another including the religion of secularism. A secular liberal democracy asks people to own their religion, to state their assumptions, to contribute their perspectives, in a marketplace. Democracy is a structured conversation of perspectives. Volf says that for democracy to flourish people need to be able to speak their faith. Democracy itself asks us about our faith.

“**Who** do you say that I am?” Jesus asked.

“Who **do** you say that I am?” Jesus asked.

“Who do **you** say that I am?” Jesus asked.

“Who do you **say** that I am?” Jesus asked.

“Who do you say that **I** am?” Jesus asked.

All of the above.

Emily Dickinson wrote a poem to a distant un-expressive lover of hers. It began with this line: "To love me is one thing; to tell me you love me is another."

That is the edge in the question. It anticipates personal involvement. Not a cool analysis of options. Not practised or second-hand or objective. And Peter said - "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." "Blessed are you," said Jesus.

God weaves genuine and honest faith into the unfinished mat we call the church.

God builds the church from such faith. Woven with the faith handed to us from generations before us, God builds a movement that the gates of hell cannot withstand. The gates of hate, of violence, of despair, cannot stop God's movement of faith. As people who seek to follow, how might we speak of our faith?

The question Jesus asks – who do you say that I am? Or a question I have been asked:

Why do you still follow Jesus?

Our answer will be shaped by the questioner and the context and the flow of the conversation. And the answer will differ according to our recent experiences. So here is mine, today, in this context.

Why do I still follow Jesus?

There is the figure of Jesus himself – the Jesus I know through the stories told in the early church recorded in the Bible. When I read of him in the gospels, when I attend to him, he intrigues me. He questions me and challenges me. He inquires of my spirit, my attitudes, my daily life. Last week there was the story of the Canaanite woman, initially avoided by Jesus. Then he seems to change his mind. Although others dismissed her, Jesus is persuaded by her argument. It's a story worth living with for a week. And today, the images of a living God, of overcoming the gates of hell, of binding and loosening – because that is what we do, we human beings, all the time. He keeps me following through the quality of his questioning, the insistence of his questioning, the life-changing power of his questioning.

What keeps me following?

The experience of wonder – the surprising beauty of a peaceful harbour, spring flowers appearing again yet freshly, unpaintable sunrises, sunsets photographs cannot capture. The presence of evil – the capacity of humans to destroy, to hate, to divide. I keep following because his life takes powers, empires seriously, my own capacities and limitations – our faith focuses on light and does not ignore darkness. The kind of god Jesus points to – not a mono-coloured distant deity, an object out there, but an immersed, embodied, engaging god, a living, moving, spirited god, more than any we could paint on our own.

What keeps me following?

The ridiculous hope I see among people who follow him, especially those who face the worst life brings. The resilience people gain from God – the women of south Sudan, the people of ancient Israel, the Christians in Palestine, those determined to

end poverty in our nation. The notion of life in the face of death, of standing before a grave or a casket and honouring the life and the body, the whole person, made in the image of god, cherished. That in Jesus, God raises up the whole of our humanness, even as our body dissolves. I keep following because the god of Jesus cherishes every human being, even when the church doesn't. I need the god of Jesus because the church is not enough.

What keeps me following?

That in a way I am not that important. I am only part of a living story. Humanity is not the centre of things. I live only for a time and return to the elements from which I came, like grass that withers. What is most important endures, and will be taken up by those who come after, by others in the faith.

What keeps me following?

My daily experience of love, free, lavished, abundant, unearned, embodied, difficult at times, and it is the core of our faith. I am not trying to persuade anyone, or to be complete in what I say, or to be careful. But the question is asked because faith is not assumed, nor constant, nor smooth, nor unchanging. And the answer is mine, today, in this place, incomplete. You can help me by wondering and asking yourself, in our community.

Why am I still seeking to follow Jesus?



**KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**  
*growing in courage to live the Jesus way*



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)