

Pentecost 13A

Meta

Date: August 23, 2026

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Isaiah 51.1-6

Psalm 138

Romans 11.25-36

Matthew 16.13-25

Opening

In his lifetime, it's estimated that the Anglican preacher, George Whitefield, preached 18,000 sermons. He was a key figure in the Great Awakening here in America in the 1730s/1740s. After he returned to England, Whitefield preached to miners in the fields near Bristol, England. Crowds of 10,000 would assemble outdoors to hear Whitefield proclaim the Gospel. Ten thousand grew to twenty thousand and soon some of Whitefield's associates grew concerned that the crowds and the miners gathered wouldn't remember the rich content of these sermons they were hearing. To which Whitefield replied, "I do not preach to influence their memory. I preach so that they may come under the influence of the Holy One of God."

Hearing that anecdote was a turning point for me as a young preacher. Somehow I had got it into my head in seminary that a good sermon had to be a memorable sermon. And then I got to a point where I couldn't remember my own sermons. From time to time, someone has said to me, "I remember you once said in a sermon, etc., etc." To which I've often replied, "Well, that sounds like me, but your memory is better than mine!"

Our faith is not grounded in what we remember or don't remember about our Lord. We are not saved by facts or knowledge. Our faith stands on encountering the Holy One of God, Jesus Christ, and confessing Him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

The Shifting Sand of Signs

When Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.' And Jesus answered Peter saying,

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

St. Peter's confession is one of the peak moments in the Gospels. It is the very bedrock of the Church. The Confession of St. Peter is a feast day that Christians celebrate on January 18th and why? Because this confession is a revelation—a revelation not achieved by facts or by information; it cannot be attained through study or even signs and wonders. Only **the Father** can reveal this mystery—that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, that he is God. And only a heart made ready for that truth can receive that revelation.

Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. “Flesh and blood,” a common Jewish phrase in the ancient world, a shorthand way of describing human beings, things of this earth. “Flesh and blood” doesn’t mean one person or a few human beings, it means earthly ways of reasoning and thinking. The wisdom of this fallen world cannot open the doors of the heart. St. Paul described the wisdom of flesh and blood when he wrote to the Corinthian church saying “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.”¹

The Greek way sought to know God through **rational argument and discourse**. The way of the Pharisee was to identify the Messiah through **signs and wonders**—miraculous works that prove the supernatural power of the Christ. Flesh and blood wisdom. And what do these two forms of ‘wisdom’ have in common? Neither needs a Father. These two forms of fallen wisdom depend entirely on me, my intellect, my strength of perception or observation. Neither of which requires relationship.

Last week Fr. John spoke about Christ's healing encounter with a Canaanite woman, setting the wider context of that story against an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about purity. That background conversation was essential to help us see the example of pure faith when Jesus healed the daughter of a believing Canaanite woman.

Today we have another Jesus-Pharisees conversation in the background. It's a conversation that occurs immediately before Jesus enters Caesarea Philippi where Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ. This prior conversation is vital to understand the mystery of faith that Peter confesses.

Before Jesus enters Caesarea Philippi, Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus. They have probably come because they've learned about signs and wonders Jesus performed throughout Galilee in recent days. Jesus has healed scores of people who were paralyzed, blind, and unable to speak. He has brought peace and calm to souls severely oppressed by demons. He fed more than 5,000 from only five loaves and two fish. Then he fed more than 4,000 from only seven loaves and two small fish. A wave of signs and wonders happened wherever Jesus went in Galilee, so the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus to investigate. Apparently these signs weren't enough for the Pharisees. Here's what St. Matthew says to open chapter 16, our chapter for the morning

the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test (Jesus) they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

Apparently feeding more than 10,000 people wasn't a gesture grand enough to satisfy the Pharisees and Sadducees. ‘They asked Jesus to show **them** a sign from heaven.’ Here's the thing with signs. Signs and wonders will never be enough to make a hardened heart believe. See Exodus, see Pharaoh. Even if God raised a man from the dead,² it won't be enough to convince a heart hardened by pride, one puffed up by his own knowledge,³ like the Pharisees. So Jesus said to the Pharisees just before

¹ 1 Corinthians 1.22-23

² Luke 16.31

³ 1 Corinthians 8.1

entering Caesarea Philippi, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.'⁴ Said the Son of Man who was indeed destined for resurrection, but only after he would reveal himself through another sign—the sign of the cross, revealing himself a crucified Messiah.

As Jesus said, *the demand for signs is a stratagem of the evil one*. Jesus knows this from personal experience. Remember Christ in the wilderness of his temptation, early in Matthew's Gospel, before his ministry begins even, right after his baptism when the Father said 'You are my beloved Son.' Forty days after that revelation of the Father's love in Jesus' baptism, the Enemy of God said to a famished Jesus in the desert, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.' Prove it by miraculous actions, Jesus! But to prove his sonship through a miracle would be to turn his back on the Father's voice of love he heard in the River. The Pharisees echo that satanic attack when they demand signs and wonders to prove Jesus' identity.

Not so with Peter when Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The twelve have been witnesses of great signs and wonders, too. They've even seen more than the Pharisees! Peter has walked on water, and was then saved by the Lord when he failed to believe. Peter saw signs, yes, but Peter was humbled and nearly drowned in his doubts. He cried out to the Lord to be saved. And that makes all the difference! Peter has seen Jesus do works no other mortal could do, but he knows from experience that without faith, without belief from the heart, a man will sink in the sea of his own understanding.⁵

"Who do you say that I am?" And Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And this comes not from seeing miracles of feeding thousands upon thousands; of healing and cures. It comes from a heart prepared by humility, a heart saved by love after his own failure, a teachable heart, a repentant heart. And to this heart, the Father reveals the Son and gives to Peter the gift of faith. 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.'

And it is on this confession that Christ builds his Church! Not just the words themselves, but the confession of Christ from the heart. These words can never be lip service. We can only speak this confession when we have encountered the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desires that all men and women be saved; who always desires to speak to every heart; but who can only be heard by the heart humble enough to believe the mystery of Love that surpasses knowledge.⁶

The confession of Jesus Christ from the heart is the solid rock of the Church! Our faith does not rest on signs and wonders, whether God shows a miracle or not. That would be a house of faith built on sinking sand. Our faith depends on the work of the Father speaking to the heart about his Son by the Holy Spirit.

The Mystery of Belief in the Virgin Birth

When I was a seminary student, I had a summer job with a parachurch ministry that led youth mission trips. I was a site leader for a small group of college students who would host and lead these mission trips for 70 or 80 middle and high school kids. As I got to know my team, sometimes they would want

⁴ Matthew 16.4

⁵ Matthew 14.22-33

⁶ Ephesians 3.19

to talk theology since I was in seminary. One of my team members told me about her journey of faith, which was a remarkable story. She actually had been attending an Anglican church, but was struggling to believe in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. She attended services, she prayed and read Scripture, spoke with the pastor about all this, but still struggled to believe that the Son of God could be conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. It was a real struggle for her and she couldn't get there intellectually. She was at an intellectual impasse, but still she prayed for help. And then she said, "But I came to a point after searching for answers for a long time—and I don't exactly know how this happened—but somehow I believed it. I don't know how. It wasn't that all the questions were clear, but something happened in my heart and I believed that the Virgin Birth is true."

It remains one of the most inspiring testimonies of faith I have ever heard.

A Fourfold Way – Love, Prayer, Example, and (maybe) Words

I imagine that all of us have people in our lives whom we dearly love that do not confess our Lord Jesus Christ. Or have known Him and have walked away from the faith or from the Church. This is why we added these petitions into the Prayers of the People every Sunday. These are our family members, our children, our grandchildren, our closest friends. What do we do with this deep desire that they would know, love, and confess Jesus Christ?

Let us learn from Peter's confession. Flesh and blood cannot reveal the mystery of love. Only the Father can. A heart does not come home to Christ because we finally phrased things in the right way. It doesn't hear the Father speak because we found a stronger argument or got better responding to their questions.

Yet we do participate in the work of the Father, who reveals Jesus Christ to the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is mysterious work. Standing with the Church on this good confession, we join the Father as he calls all to himself.

To close, I'd like to briefly offer a fourfold way of joining the Father in our desire for our family and friends to know Christ. Four ways of witness: love, prayer, example, and words, in that order.

❖ Love

Love family and friends for God's sake, not for our sake. Be kind and gracious whether someone confesses Christ or not. Demonstrate love through actions rather than words. Your actions don't even need to be known.

Love also with great patience. God has given everyone free will. He invites all to himself, but he never imposes himself on anyone. Honor each person's freedom, even as we desire that each loved one would bend the knee and come home to Jesus. And this brings us to...

❖ Prayer

The words we speak to God interceding for our unbelieving friends and family members are far more important than any words we speak to those loved ones.

A parent who was distressed that her growing children had no interest in church came to a monk for counsel. She was at a loss, and asked him what she should do. All her attempts at conversation with them were going nowhere. The monk said, "Talk to God about your children instead of talking to your children about God."

Wherever there is resistance or hardness of heart to Jesus, flesh and blood cannot convince someone of the Lord's goodness. But our battle is not with flesh and blood. We trust in the power of God in the heavenly realm to soften hearts, to accomplish salvation that no one could ask or imagine.

❖ Example

Thirdly, our example. This is third in order because without **love** and **prayer** as our beginning, our example would be empty. But to love and prayer we add the importance of our actions, our habits, our attitudes. Like children constantly watch their parents, so we can be sure that our unbelieving family and friends watch our actions. This is true, but it need not create some kind of performance anxiety, as if someone's faith rests entirely on ourselves. No, if anything, I hope that someone would see within me the example of a struggler, but a struggler who lives with peace and great hope. A struggler who, like Peter, has come face to face with my weakness and failures, yet has found the glorious grace and freedom that Christ is grace; that without Christ I can do nothing. May our loved ones find us to be those who struggle in the way of Jesus but do not despair, instead living with joy because our hope is in Christ alone, not ourselves. That is where our example begins.

❖ Words

And finally words—maybe. I'm not even sure words will be necessary for us. Before we ever speak, we must listen well to those we love. And as we listen, we pray. In the spirit of St. Francis, use words only as necessary. But read the Scriptures and we will see that words are instrumental when one is seeking Christ. And here is the scriptural pattern: it is best to *wait until someone asks you a question*; if and when they want your words in their journey of faith.⁷ Use words only after committing first to deepen your love, prayer, and example. And then your words will be well seasoned, and you, too, can speak words of life.

Closing

Love, prayer, example, and words, in that order. But remember, brothers and sisters, ours is such a small part to play. We are not necessary. But God in his goodness, has called his saints to join him in the work of drawing all men and women to his Son, Jesus. Flesh and blood cannot do this, but the Father can. We have been brought into the Father's house by his grace and his goodness. We have not placed our faith on wonders and manifestations of power. We have placed our faith on this sure and steadfast confession: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He, who was crucified, risen, and ascended now lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, calling all men, women, and children to Himself from his glorious throne in heaven. Amen.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin notes well that every sermon in the Book of Acts occurs after a question was asked by an inquirer or opponent of the Gospel.