

**Sermon: 2020/08/23 (12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) -
Genesis 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew
16:13-20_BTR**

[Ask for children to come forward. Have a large cardboard box ready, a marker pen, and a craft-knife (box-cutter).]

Speaking about what it means to be a Jesus-follower - a *Christian* - Saint Paul advised his friends in Rome to 'not conform yourself to the world'.

But, rather, to be 'a living sacrifice'.

And what did he mean by that?

Hm. [Pause. Thoughtful expression.]

Well, to 'conform' yourself to something, is to try and make yourself *fit* into it. Like a snail must *conform* its slimy, gross little body to *squeeze* into a shell. And *I* want a volunteer to try and "conform" themselves to fit into this cardboard box.

Go on!

Conform yourself.

[Child attempts to squash themselves into the box, but fails.]

It's hard, isn't it?

Well, this box is like the world - *people* - around us:

[Write "the world" on the box whilst the child remains within.]

They have sinful ideas about how we should dress,
what we should look like,
what things we should watch on TV,
what things we should enjoy;
what things are "cool" or "uncool."
How we should spend our money.
About what's normal and right, and what's weird and wrong.

And what *Paul* is saying to us (this morning) is that trying to "conform" yourself to *those* things - trying to "conform" yourself to people's *worldly* "expectations" - is a silly waste of time.

[Pick up box. Draw a cross on it.]

Instead, he says, we should look to Jesus.
And *conform* ourselves to be more like Him.
(The perfect refection of God.)
Now, our "conformity" isn't in every detail, of course.
He died on a cross.

[Show the cross on the box to the congregation; cut it out.]

And we don't need to die on crosses too.
But we *do* need to make choices that show we *appreciate* how He died for us.
That is to say, Saint Paul teaches us that we should make *cross-shaped* or *cross-conforming* choices.

Let's pray:
Lord God, ... , amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

On the south bank of the River Thames (in London),
almost next door to Shakespeare's "Globe" Theatre,
and just a short walk across the "Millennium Bridge" from St. Paul's Cathedral,
sits a *hideous(!)*, brown-brick building - a former coal and oil-burning power-
station, it now houses the Tate Modern,
Britain's *premier* "house" of contemporary art.

Most of its "treasures" are abstract pieces by young, "hip," celebrity types
- you know what I'm referring to:
large canvases on which someone appears to have vomited a tin of paint,
or against which they talentlessly flicked their brush to create rainbow sprays
- the sort of thing any two or three year old can do before they actually learn
dexterity with a brush or a pencil.
Well, despite not being a fan - as you could probably tell - I've been *many* times to
see the installations in what's called the "Turbine Hall."

The Turbine Hall is a *huge* space on the ground-floor of the "Tate."
Absolutely massive: *hundreds* of feet wide; *hundreds* of feet tall.
From above, visitors; the tourists look like tiny little ants scurrying around.
And in this gigantic room is where the curators put the *really* big, interactive stuff.
A box of glass filled with an eerie mist and glowing lights, with a door, that was
large enough for people to walk in and out of, twenty or thirty at a time.
A really, *really* tall twisty chute - like the sort of thing from a water-park - for

adults to act like kids whilst pretending to be serious, highbrow connoisseurs.

Well, one year, many years ago, they had something called, "The Shibboleth." For this they dug up the floor of the Turbine Hall, down to a few meters, and then re-poured the concrete except, deliberately, leaving a *long(!)*, meandering, rather angry-looking crack that ran all the way through it, from one end to the other:

167 meters long, in fact.

It began at one end of the Hall as a "hairline," and then expanded to a few feet wide and split into two breaks - almost like a capital "Y," but drawn by a sky-tall titan.

The crack - the "Shibboleth" - at its widest was wide enough to fall in.

And many did.

Exchange-students - from Italy, Japan, France, and so on.

Others, like me, just pretended to "fall" in; or to get one's foot stuck in it.

Or a head.

Into the Shibboleth fell cell-phones and earrings and wallets.

It was hilarious!

I just stood and watched for a while whilst security-guards and those people employed by museums to "Shush!" you tried to chase teenagers out of it; to protect this precious piece that looked, well, like a case of very expensive earthquake damage.

"Earthquake damage" that cost, to be precise, £300,000 to make.^[n.1]

But the point of this ridiculous waste of good money was to symbolize the divisions that exist between people.

Divisions of sex.

Divisions of power.

Divisions of money; (between rich and poor).

Divisions of language and ideology.

These "divisions" run between people like great, dark cracks.

Some are real; undeniable.

Some are imaginary; *artificial*.

But one "division" matters more than *all* the rest - and it "hinges" on a question.

The *most* important question you can ever be asked.

Even more so than "Will you marry me?"

Even more than: "Will you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

And this - the most important of questions - is: "'But who do *you* say that I am?'"

- Jesus posed this question to His friends; His disciples - the "Apostles."

“But who do *you* say that I am?”

It seems harmless enough, innocuous; but actually “cuts” to the heart of many philosophical, theological and moral issues, which intersect on it.

This question - the most important of questions - is like the “Big Bang” before the explosion.

A pregnant woman at the end of her ninth-month.

Everything changes afterward.

How will you answer it?

Peter answered it this way:

He said - “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And *this* is the rock on which Christ says the Church will be built.

This identification; this *naming* of Jesus as the creator of the universe in humble form as a young rabbi from Galilee.

The ‘rock’ isn’t Peter as we’re accustomed to think so much as it is his answer; this declaration.

A “declaration” which then becomes a border; a *division* between the Church and the “world.”

The divider, in fact.

The “ring-fence.”

If you can say the same as Peter, honestly, whole-heartedly, then you are firmly and safely on one side of that border - already in the New “Canaan.”

The eternal Kingdom-of-God-which-is-coming.

A citizen of a country about to be born.

But perhaps you find yourself on the other side of this “Shibboleth”?

Looking across the “crack” - *daunted* by it.

Maybe even...embarrassed by it?

Could one question and one answer be as critical as I claim?

Jesus thought so.

Just look at His response:

“*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!*”

On our insert it isn’t italicised or printed in block, bold print - but it ought to be!

Jesus is, at that moment, exclaiming with excitement.

Shouting and laughing with pleasant surprise.

Yes!

(Finally.)

Peter had got it right.

And think through the implications of what this means.

It “means” that Jesus wasn’t, then, just some sort of “guru.”

Not just a wise-man.

A good “chap.”

Not a fraud or a crazy.

Not a "Ghandi" nor a "Che."

Not a "Trump" nor a "Biden."

Jesus is something *more*.

Something else;

something far, far *better*.

He is...*the Messiah*.

Which is to say, Jesus is a *unique* figure, prophesied about; *promised thousands* of years before He was actually born.

The Messiah is *the* superhero:

a divine savior that the Jews had whispered about, quietly to one-another in hushed tones as they languished in leg-irons as "POWs" in filthy labor-camps in Babylon during The Exile.

He had been a rallying-cry of the Israelites armies as they charged and crushed the Canaanites.

Angels sang about Him over the hills of Bethlehem.

Prophets had "thundered" about Him in the royal courts of Jerusalem in judgment of corrupt Judean kings.

Greater than angels, God the universe-maker Himself.

If you can, then, let's stand together to proclaim *our* faith in this *amazing* "Messiah" in the words of the Creed...

Footnotes:

1. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibboleth_\(artwork\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibboleth_(artwork)).