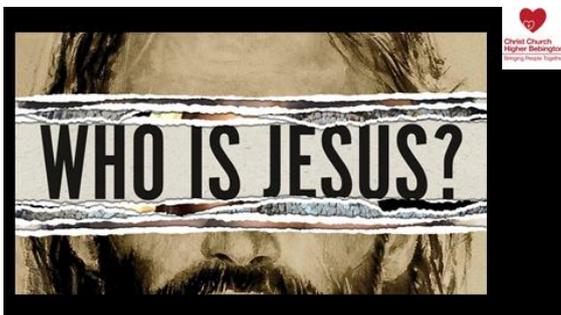


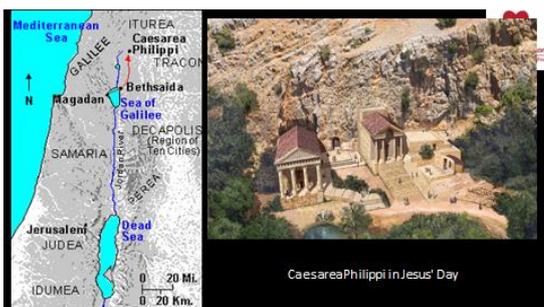
Prayer: May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory. Amen

During our series on Why I am a Christian – each of us at some time had to answer a significant question – who is Jesus? Having grappled with that and been confronted with claims and identity of the person of Jesus we then had to work out what difference it would make in our lives.



Today as we've return to the lectionary readings (the readings set out for many churches across the world today) we are confronted with those same 2 questions – who is Jesus and what difference does it make in our lives.

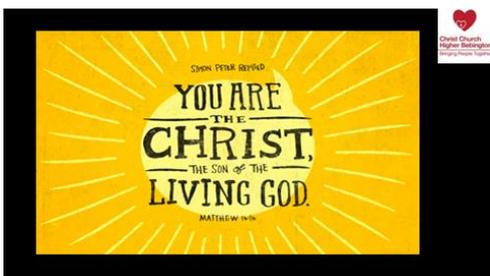
Our gospel reading from Matthew occurs after several debates and questions from the Pharisees and Sadducees resulting in Jesus warning his disciples against their teaching. Now he takes his disciples away from the busyness and his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, northwards – some 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi also known as ancient Paneas – based at the southern foot of Mount Hermon, some 1150 feet above sea level. It probably took a couple of days walking to get there. I wonder what they talked about as they walked?



Although Caesarea Philippi was a beautiful place, very lush and full of life with one of the main sources of the River Jordan, the city itself was dominated by immoral activities and pagan worship vastly different from those of the nearby Jewish towns. Even in Old Testament times, it had become a centre for Baal worship. Later the worship of Greek fertility gods developed with shrines and temples particularly in honour of the Greek god, Pan and very

evident in Jesus' day. Not the sort of place you would expect Jesus to take his disciples and one which devout Jews normally avoided describing it as a city of people eagerly knocking on the doors of hell.

But it's here, in this very place that Jesus asks the disciples who the people are saying that he, the Son of Man is. Some thought John the Baptist – a recent fiery prophet that challenged the people to repent who had lived very differently to Jesus; others thought Elijah that great Old Testament prophet that had challenged the prophets of Baal; may be even Jeremiah that prophet of lament and gloom or another prophet. But none seemed to match the Jesus we've seen so far.



But regardless of what others think it's important that we think through this question for ourselves. So Jesus turns to the disciples and poignantly asks – who do **you** say I am? Did Peter hesitate? Was there a pregnant pause? But what he came out with was staggering! You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Christ was the very one all their prophecies over the centuries looked forward to. The one they longed for as a warrior King and a deliverer; the one who would purge the Temple and restore the Jews to God. But if anyone dared to claim they were the Christ they would be immediately confronted by hostility from the religious leaders. That Jesus accepted Peter's claim was startling, even revolutionary! Perhaps that's why they needed to be far away from Jewish culture to grasp of reality of what he was saying.

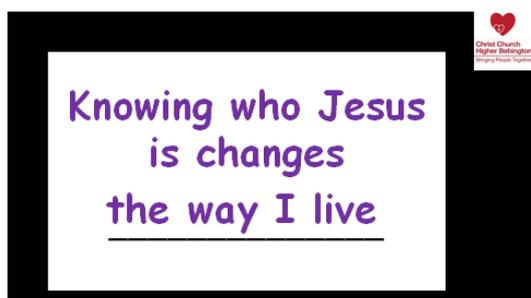
But even Peter, at that time, didn't grasp the significance of his words! Jesus really was the Son of the Living God, and not just honoured with that title. It would be many years before the church would fully acknowledge Jesus as THE son of God, God incarnate and the second person of the trinity.



However it was on the rock of such firm faith that Jesus would build his Church. Despite being surrounded by rocks of pagan worship – maybe even standing in front of the cave and spring water at Caesarea Philippi which many in that city believed was literally the gate to the underworld – the gates of Hades – Jesus would establish an invincible church that even the gates of Hades would not be able to overcome!

Jesus was setting up an indestructible Kingdom far greater and unconquerable superseding the pagan ideas of that city, or the religiosity of Jews! Peter and the disciples would soon be the ones to “bind and loose” his teaching – a phrase often used by the rabbis to emphasise their authority.

Something very momentous and world transforming was about to happen through Jesus and his followers. But it wouldn't occur in the way that they were anticipating! Far from it! They were in for a shock! It was a Kingdom not of dominating control but of self-sacrifice.



Knowing who Jesus is, and acknowledging recognising that he is more than a prophet – he is the Son of God - changes everything about us and introduces a completely new value system into our lives - well at least it should!

There would be a new Temple but not one built with rocks and stones it would be with human lives. A new community – a united body – living our Jesus' life.

Our first reading was from the letter which the apostle Paul wrote to the young Church in Rome. He'd spent more than the first half this letter explaining the tremendous mercy of God available for



all who turn to Jesus – the Christ - for forgiveness and acceptance. Now he explains in very practical terms what it is to be part of this Kingdom – a member of the living Temple.

Temple worship had always been associated with animal sacrifice – but this isn't part of Jesus' Kingdom. What he desires is probably even harder – our lives offered as living sacrifices. He desires that we die to ourselves and live for him and for others. But as someone rightly said – the problem with living sacrifices is that they so often want to get off the altar! There is often a conflict between our desires and God's.



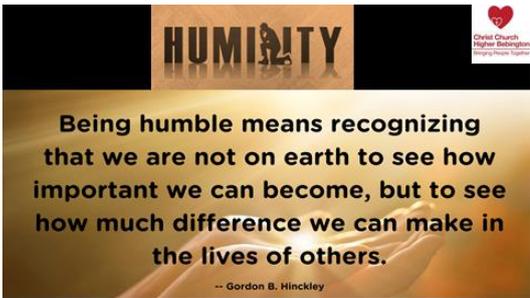
Paul is always practical in his teaching – and so he encourages them to consider how this relates to their minds, attitudes and actions. Today we are bombarded by advertising, teaching, slogan that we matter, that we are the centre of our world – everything should revolve around us - but Paul places a different emphasis – do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Be prepared to be stand out and

different!

How you think determines what you'll become. But how can our minds be transformed? If we start to think as Jesus thought – then we'll begin to live like Jesus lived.

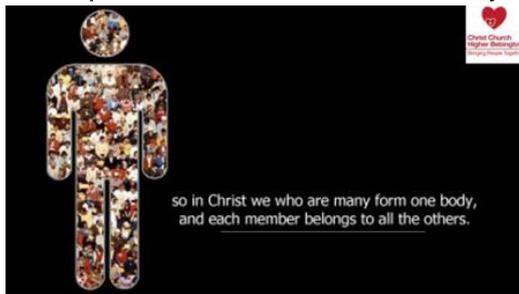


A phrase that was very much around 30 years ago – and I haven't come across anything better is "what would Jesus do?" Instead of rushing into things we need to stop and think – what would Jesus do – and then do that! We'll only gain a better understanding of Jesus would do if we spend time reading, meditating, discussing the Bible. We need minds focused on Jesus to be transformed into his likeness.



When we look at Jesus we see humility vividly demonstrated. If we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God – the creator of all things - then we should never cease to be amazed that he came to earth, was born in obscure surroundings, lived a life of love and died an exceptionally humiliating death – for us. So surely we too need to learn humility - having a correct assessment of ourselves. Instead of seeking how important we can become we need to focus on how much difference we can make in the lives of others and willingly put others first.

Paul spoke of the church as a Body – which is comprised of many individual parts. While some separate parts may be able to function well alone they will only be truly effective and add value when they are interacting with others. Although we come to Jesus as individuals we are not called to stay as individuals – we become members of his body. We belong to each other and the greatest demonstration of Jesus at work in our lives is seen through our love and service for one another.



We all have different roles and gifts – just like our body parts. You can do things I can't do and vice versa! But every one of us is unique, necessary and essential for the growth of this Church. This church will only grow as we give ourselves to one another and become more like Jesus!



A friend forwarded a Facebook share with me during the week – which ended up with - Make a list of every God-given gift, asset, advantage, or other benefit you possess that is, or could be, a blessing to others. Don't use worldly systems in developing your list. Focus on character issues such as integrity, loyalty, generosity, discernment, wisdom, and patience. Think of ways you can use each one of these features to glorify God and be a blessing to others.

God has uniquely gifted us. I wonder what we will do with our gifts? Will we give them back to God for the benefit of others? Begrudgingly? Reluctantly? Or will we excel in their use – as Paul described – generously, diligently, cheerfully.

I wonder if this week we will be willing to reconsider who Jesus is. If we're prepared to acknowledge that he is the Son of God - will we allow this to influence all that we do? Are we ready to follow Jesus and become more like Jesus? My prayer is that we would – not in our own strength but through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen