

Rocky Road: Who Do You Say That I Am? - Sunday 18th February 2024

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Let's pray for Ian and ourselves as we tuck into this Rocky Road series that we've been doing on the life of Peter. Lord, thanks very much for Ian. He's a top man and we love him.

So thank you for the prayer and the prep that he's put into what he's going to share with us today. And we ask, Lord, that in all that he says and shares, that we might hear you speaking through him into our lives, that we might be ever more like you with how we live, we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Morning, everyone. Good to see you. It's good, isn't it? It is good at the start of the service here. And Matt was sort of praying, just getting serious about some of the stuff that is going on in the world.

And that's difficult. But as I start this morning, I just want to kind of bring a lighter touch, okay, to how we begin.

So just a quick show of hands. Anybody had a go at doing some research or thinking about doing some research on your family tree?

[1 : 05] Anybody? Yeah? Okay. Yeah. Quite a few people. A lot of people, in fact. How far back did you get? How many generations, roughly? Just shout them out.

17s are here over here. Oh, 1700s. Okay. It's pretty impressive, yeah. I've talked about it with my brother, about doing it. Because I'm interested. Because half of my family comes from Ireland. And the other half has its roots in Scotland. And I was born in Dagenham. So I'm not quite sure what I'm going to find, if I'm honest.

So we haven't gone there yet. But a friend of mine, who I'm speaking to this week, Andy, he's been working on his family tree now for quite a while. And to get ready for this, he's managed to go back to 250 AD.

I mean, he's actually shown me the list. And it just goes on and on and on. I mean, that is going some, isn't it? That's early church stuff. And obviously, sort of looking at all the hands up earlier, it's obviously become a bit of a thing, hasn't it, over these last few years?

[2 : 16] Investigating and discovering our ancestral past. And you can even now, and maybe some of you have, send off a DNA sample with companies like Ancestry.com.

And obviously, it helps you go sort of even further back. You can find out if you've got any Viking blood in you. And I guess there's something quite fundamental about reconnecting with our own sense of identity.

Who we are, where we've come from. And as I say, this question of identity is really, really quite topical. One of the best TV series that I think has picked up on this is the program, isn't it?

Who Do You Think You Are? Who's seen it? I'm guessing most of you. Yeah, we've all kind of watched it, haven't you? It's a series in which different celebrities go in search of their family ancestors.

And usually, they turn up a few skeletons, don't they, in the cupboard. And some family secrets. And often, if you've seen it, it's quite emotional, isn't it? People often shed a few tears.

[3 : 28] So by way of introducing our theme for this morning, I'd like to show you a clip of one particular episode of this program. And it's a cheeky chappy that was on the show back in 2016.

And maybe he is a bit Marmite for some people. And some of you might even remember I did use this clip about seven years ago for another talk.

So it's Danny Dyer, that lovable rogue. Oh, I got it there. You know, the Marmite moment. Oh, no, not Danny Dyer. His family has been in the Canning Town part of the East End of London for three generations that he knows of.

So here is Danny when he finds out just how far back his family tree goes. So Elizabeth Seymour, John Seymour, Wentworth's.

Sir Henry Hotspur Percy. Philippa Plantagenet. Explain to me.

[4 : 46] So I don't know if that name Plantagenet... Plantagenet, obviously not. Because I've got to say it wrong, so I have no idea. Right. Well, that, if you follow the line back up to the top, you'll see where that name takes us.

Lionel Plantagenet. Edward III. Edward III, that great medieval king. So Edward III, yes, he's your 22 times great grandfather.

So you are directly descended from King Edward III of England? I can't be.

I can't be. A direct descendant from Edward III. Sir Danny Dyer's right at the bottom of that scroll and Edward III's at the top of the scroll.

It's just stupid, isn't it? It's great. It's fantastic. It's quite amazing. It's pretty amazing, isn't it? It really is.

[5 : 57] I just need to just digest it and get it in my nut and then I can move on with my life. I think I'm going to treat myself to a raff. What, the...

Yeah. Yeah, it would be a good look for you. Just get a massive raff, just bowl about with it and, you know, if anyone questions it and then I'll explain to them why I'm wearing a raff. That's true, yeah.

And then I'll have to walk away, won't they, embarrassed?

And actually we can go and find out a bit more about Edward III, if you like, further up in the abbey.

Can I just take another moment? Can I just have a moment? Sure. Just have a moment, just have a moment to myself to just...

A kid from Cannington, custom house. And this is my bloodline. Oh, can I have a moment now, let's go. Look on his face, it's priceless, isn't it?

Just says it all. Going to get me a raff, I love that. So this morning, we're going to take a look at when Jesus asks his disciples about his identity.

[7 : 02] And over these last couple of weeks, as we've kind of got into this, we've started this series, we've been looking at Peter and some of the more significant moments or episodes of his time with Jesus.

And these stained glass images depict those events. And it's interesting, I think, as I kind of looked at these and I think, Peter is shown here, isn't he, in his later life.

So he looked to me, I mean, you have a look to what you think, but I sort of thought he looked about 60, maybe even 70, depending on how generous you're going to be. And not the 20 or 30-something that he probably was when these events happened.

And so on the leftmost window, and thinking back to Dave's talk, we see Peter's calling in Galilee, the start of a relationship, as Dave said, setting Peter on a path that he doesn't even really know himself where it's going to lead.

But he steps up and he follows Jesus and not the crowd. And then last week, Kim explored just how much Peter trusted Jesus.

[8 : 19] But how Peter so often, part of his character, isn't he, so often acts on impulse. And that a good idea is not always a God idea.

And so this morning, in true play school tradition, those of you that remember that program, we're going to look through the third window. Okay?

And our reading is taken from Matthew chapter 16, verses 13 to 20. It's the moment when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is.

And Peter gives his answer to this question. When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is?

They replied, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you?

[9 : 29] He asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

So here we are in chapter 16 in Matthew. The disciples have spent two or possibly three years with Jesus, and so much has happened.

They've seen and heard incredible things. The miracles, Jesus teaching, seeing and doing it all for real. And seeing Jesus take on the religious authorities.

[10:51] You only have to flick back a few verses to see him brushing off the Pharisees and the Sadducees when they demand a sign from heaven to prove who he is.

And so Jesus decides to take the disciples well away from their normal sphere of activity to ask them a question.

And he heads off north with them, away from Galilee, up to Caesarea Philippi. And that would have been about 35 miles, give or take.

So, you know, we're talking a good couple of days walk. And I don't know about you, but it seems an odd choice. Caesarea Philippi, it wasn't a Jewish town.

In fact, the very opposite. It would have been known throughout the region as a pagan center of worship. Called Benias historically, and it was designated for the worship of the Greek god Pan.

[11:56] Now, maybe, maybe Jesus was taking them up there for a spa break, because it was a really verdant and green area because of the water. But the contrast, I don't think, couldn't have been any stronger than with Galilee.

Now, Philip, one of Herod's sons, named the place for the Roman emperor, Tiberius. And this picture here gives you some idea of what it might have looked like.

It was a walled city with a lot of Roman and Greek influence, as you'd expect. And you can see there at the back, if you look, the pagan temple was built into the cliff face.

The city drew its water supply from a natural spring that came out of that cliff face. It made the whole area, as I said, fertile. And it was known as the Panaeus Spring, the Grotto of Pan.

And it was one of the main tributaries that then sort of flowed down into the Jordan. So, that is the site today. And just out of interest, who's been there?

[13:07] Because if you've been to Israel, yeah, you've spent some time there. Yeah, and that is the aerial view. Okay, so that's what it looks like, obviously, from above.

And this, this is an artist's impression of what it may very well have looked like in Jesus's day. Oh, there we go.

By magic. And so, on the left is the temple there, dedicated to the emperor. And behind that, the Grotto to Pan. And then, to the side of that is the Shrine to Pan, in the middle.

And if you've been there, you know, there's lots of little alcoves, isn't there? And there would have been idols that were kind of located in those alcoves. And then, a little bit further along was another temple.

This one's for Zeus. Zeus. And then, finally, right on the right-hand side, that's the dancing floor of the sacred goats. I'll kind of leave that one up to your imagination.

[14:11] Jesus has spent the last two or three years teaching, healing the sick, calming storms, even raising the dead. And now, nearing the end of his ministry, he comes here.

And he asks his disciples a question. And I don't know about you, but, you know, you've got to wonder, why here? I mean, that cave behind the temple there was believed to be the entrance to the underworld, to Hades, Pan's lair.

There's a statue of Pan, the hairy half-man, half-goat god of Greek mythology. He is the original bad boy of mythology.

It speaks to our very basic instincts. He watched over all the wild things. And as part of their pagan worship of Pan, there was some pretty dark stuff that went on up here in Jesus' day.

In fact, the Greek word Pan meant all-encompassing or taken up with. And it's where we get the words like panorama or panic or pandemonium.

[15:31] And of course, pandemic. So what on earth were they doing here? Jesus has very deliberately chosen this setting to ask them a question.

Who do the people say the Son of Man is? And I'm sure, you know, because it's been a couple of years, there must have been lots and lots of rumours flying around about who Jesus was.

And the disciples come back, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the wild prophets. God's mouthpiece speaking out against injustice and the wicked and rebellious kings.

And Jesus doesn't discount what they say, does he? I just love this. He just kind of like changes gear. It's in one masterful stroke.

And he just says, you know, and who do you say I am? And now it's kind of up close and personal, isn't it?

[16:52] I don't know about you, but in my mind, I just sort of, I see this awkward silence that follows. Because this just cuts to the heart of, you know, why have they been following him for the last two or three years?

Who is he? Really? And what has he come to do? You know, whatever you say, okay, at this point, okay, that is going to shape everything, isn't it, to come.

And Simon Peter, this hot-headed, impulsive, sometimes unreliable, probably a bit of a boastful loudmouth, let's be honest, okay, but also a man bursting with life, warmth, and generosity, totally sold out for Jesus and a natural leader.

He turns to Jesus and he says, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God.

And it's a turning point, isn't it? It's a profound moment. And yet, there is a sense in which even now, I don't think Peter fully understands what he's saying.

[18:19] You see, my guess is that Peter's declaration is that he sees Jesus as the true king of Israel, the final heir to the throne of David, a man sent by God to deliver Israel from its enemies.

Even the term son of God at this time would have been a known biblical phrase representing the king, the Messiah, the chosen one adopted by God to be his special representative.

But I don't think it was until after Jesus' resurrection that this very same phrase took on a whole new layer of meaning for Peter and the disciples.

What they did know was that this confession that they were making now was probably going to get them into a whole lot of trouble.

Because if Jesus is king, then Herod, and further away Caesar, is not. And that is dangerous talk.

[19:37] And maybe, maybe, that's part of the reason that he brought them up here at this time, to reveal his true identity.

Because it wasn't time yet to reveal his true identity to everyone else. So he takes them out of Galilee to do just that and then commands them not to tell anyone.

Also, the way that Jesus responds to Peter's declarations brings us back to why this particular location I think is significant.

After telling Peter that he's blessed to know this truth, Jesus goes on to say, and I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Now, I don't want to get into all the different interpretation about Peter's name and his role within the church. In fact, Matt, Matt did a really good talk during lockdown, which I really would encourage you to have another listen to, which explores this and this region in a lot more depth.

[20:49] And maybe, maybe we can get a link put together when we don't put this talk online. And go and, you know, go and have a look at that. Anyway, suffice to say, I think Jesus is looking at the cliff face here in Caesarea Philippi.

And that's why I think he's there. That's why I think he's brought them there. Okay? And then he's looking at Peter. And then he's looking at this cave.

This gateway to the underworld. These gates of Hades. And he says, even somewhere like this.

Even somewhere like this. In fact, maybe, especially, places like this can never hold back the irresistible force of God's love and his kingdom breaking through.

And Peter, I'm going to build a church of people and I'm giving you the authority to lead this church on earth. I don't think Peter could even begin to comprehend what that actually meant.

[22:11] Yeah, Peter will become in some way the wise grey-haired man in the stained glass window, but that is years away. Years of getting it wrong.

Years of having to just step out in faith. Years of being open to the spirit, shaping and forming to embrace God's bigger plan.

You only have to go back a couple of verses, or sorry, you only have to go forward a couple of verses further on into this chapter. And you see, he hasn't really got it yet. Jesus starts talking about what's going to happen now, what's to come, and Peter says, no, no, no, Lord, that's never going to happen, that's never ever going to happen to you, Lord.

Jesus rebukes him. Rocky's halo has already slipped. But it's just who Peter is right now.

He's got a lot to learn. And isn't that encouraging for you and me? Just like Peter then, we're left with this question.

[23 : 28] Who do you say that I am? And of course, each one of us has to answer that for ourselves, don't we? I suppose the safe answer for me, for us, is to recite the words of the creed, I believe.

But you know, as important as they are, this isn't just a question of words, is it? It's playing it a bit too safe.

safe. And there's nothing about God becoming a human that is safe. Not really. It's a risky business. The next few verses in this gospel, in Matthew, Jesus is going to say, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

And whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life, for me, will find it. This is not an easy thing.

[24 : 40] It's inside out and upside down. Do you think the question, who do you say that I am, really has everything to do with who are you willing to be?

See, I don't think Jesus asks us to confess who we believe he is for his sake, but rather for ours.

That we might get caught up in the irresistible power of his love and his life and become the people that we were always created to be.

And like a song, then we become the music, the melody that people hear as they encounter us in our words and our actions.

And the more we do that, the more God reveals his heart, a heart that aches with all those who are wronged and suffer, a heart that is full of compassion, a heart that is wounded and angry when injustice and greed go unchecked, a heart that is torn up in grief at the hate and violence we inflict on one another, a heart that loves us unconditionally like only a parent can, a heart that always welcomes me with grace and forgiveness when just like Peter I mess stuff up.

Jesus, it was a life infused, wasn't it, with love and joy and peace and hope and generosity and kindness and of course, sacrifice.

[26 : 34] grace. So, this week, how about just sitting, how about just sitting with this question, give it some time, don't rush it, listen to God, don't just give the answer you think you should.

God. And maybe for some of you, this question is really less about the certainty of who Jesus is.

You know that. You know that. Rather, it's more about the possibilities of what that means and how that might shape or change you.

Amen.