

Pentecost 16 – 12-09-21 - Bishop Cam Venables –

Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33; **Psalm 19**; James 2:18-26; **Mark 8:27-38**

I love it that so often in the sacred writing of our faith, we read about people we can identify with. People who doubted and had faith; people who asked questions and gave answers; and people who sometimes got it right, but much of the time missed the mark! Although religious art has a history of putting halos on the women and men who first followed Jesus it is important to recognise that they were as fallible as we are! So, if God could love them and use their lives to make a difference for good, then surely God can do the same with us?

Today's Gospel offers plenty of insight for Jesus asked his disciples two questions. *'Who do people say I am?'* he asked first. This would have been much discussed in the wider community because Jesus was doing extraordinary things in the name of God and was challenging long accepted religious teaching. In response the disciples offered some of the things that they'd heard: *'Elijah! John the Baptist! or, one of the prophets...'* But, then Jesus made it personal by asking, *'Who do YOU say that I am?'*

After all that they had witnessed and shared, Jesus asked them who they thought he was, and Peter responded with the blasphemous affirmation, *'You are the Messiah!'* In Jewish prophetic writing God had promised the people of Israel that he would choose and anoint a leader who would liberate their community and make them great again. That promise had helped to sustain the Jewish community for centuries before Jesus and the lived context for first century Palestine was that their country was not free. The Roman Empire had colonised their land, imposed unwanted laws, and demanded taxes each year. So, when Peter affirmed Jesus as Messiah, or promised liberator, there would have been political implications. Perhaps, Peter's understanding of Messiah, aligned with the belief of Jewish zealots who resisted Roman occupation, and encouraged rebellion?

We don't know...but the Gospel does not leave us wondering. Intuiting that Peter had the right title, but the wrong understanding, Jesus explained that his way of being Messiah involved suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Peter took Jesus to one side to suggest that it didn't have to be that way which provoked Jesus to rebuke him with the strongest possible words: *'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.'* Clearly Peter had an imperfect understanding about the way Jesus would use his God given authority and power. There would be no armies of angels driving out the Roman Legions, and there would not be a new Jewish kingdom anytime soon.

As an aside, it's important to remember that Jewish people do not think that Jesus was God's promised Messiah and they are still waiting for God to fulfil that promise!

After rebuking Peter, Jesus called the crowd together and gave a tough motivational speech! He said, *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.'* In this he affirmed that in following him we have to give up stuff and do things that will take us way outside our comfort zone. Somehow it will demand everything of us, and at the same time make our lives complete.

When I have opportunity, I ask Confirmation candidates to write me a note before their special day explaining why it is they want to be Confirmed, and I always enjoy reading these. In the Confirmation service, I then ask them the more significant question, 'Do you turn to Christ?' It's interesting that the Prayer Book writers have framed the question, 'Do you turn to Christ?' rather than, 'Do you turn to Jesus?', or, 'Do you turn to Jesus Christ?' I'm not sure why that is and would love to hear your thoughts.

Underpinning the formal response, 'I turn to Christ?' there is, I think, the deep question that Jesus asked his disciples in the Gospel, 'Who do you say that I am?' Who is it that we turn to when we say, 'I turn to Christ'?

It is unlikely that we would use the term Messiah because the word does not make it into our credal statements that have helped to shape our naming of God for many centuries. So, in our own words, who do we say that Jesus is? Even phrasing the question in this way I have assumed a shared belief that Jesus is present tense, and not past tense! I did not ask who Jesus WAS, I asked who Jesus IS. How would you respond?

The teaching of the Church through the centuries names Jesus as 'Saviour', 'Christ', and 'Lord'. The one who saves us; the one who is significant throughout time and space; and the leader we can trust throughout our lives. Interestingly, in hymns and songs we often use the possessive adjective 'my' before Saviour and Lord – but not before Christ. We sing, 'My Jesus! My Saviour!' and 'My Lord!' but, not 'my Christ'... again, not sure why that is.

What other terms or phrases can we use to describe Jesus? Was he simply a good man who lived a long time ago, and a role model to inspire? Or, is he – current tense – both friend and teacher; hope bringer and love giver; light bearer, and source of judgement and grace?

My hope is that for all Confirmation candidates, and for each of us, Jesus is not just someone who lived safely in the past – but is someone experienced in our time. Inevitably, we will use different words and those words will imply the nature of experienced or longed for relationship. We will think of Jesus as Saviour and Lord; Good Shepherd and Bread of Life; someone who is the Way, the truth, and the life; someone who calls us to follow, to deny ourselves, and take up our cross; and someone who is with us always.

God's blessing as you articulate your thoughts about who Jesus is; and God's blessing on your life and mine as we follow the one who invites us each day to follow.

Would you please join with me as I close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of this day. In the midst of our questioning and misunderstanding; our busyness and indifference... help us to trust you and grow more deeply in your love. Through your Spirit, fill us with compassion, and the desire to work with others for a more just world, even when that means denial, rejection, and suffering. We pray in the name of the one who shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen