

Mark 8:27 - 38 Who is Jesus and What does it Mean to Follow
Sunday 12 September 2021
Rev. Susan Pickering

Gathering of the People of God

Organ Prelude

Welcome & Notices

Centring Prayer

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for worship,
let us rest in the silence, breathing in the presence of God...

Processional Hymn

TiS 187 Let all Creation Dance

Light the Christ Candle

We light this candle as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world.

Call to Worship based on Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.

**Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**

The law of God is perfect,
reviving the soul;

**The decrees of God are sure,
making wise the simple;**

We gather here for a short time,
to offer our worship to God,
to give thanks and offer praise.

**Let us worship God
Let the words of our mouths
and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you, O God.**

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Acknowledgment of Country

We recognise that God created heaven and earth, the sea and the sky, and all that is in them.

This land is Holy Ground

As we gather we acknowledge the traditional custodians,
the Turrbal and Jagera people, elders, past, present and emerging

***We honour them for their custodianship of the land,
on which we gather today.***

Introit

Prayer of Thanksgiving & Confession

Radiant Love,
Purifying light,
We give thanks that we are able to dwell in your presence,
That you inhabit every corner of our lives,
Every corner of the world,
Every inch of the universe.

You know our struggles and our doubts,
Our confusion and our chaos.
With repentant hearts we turn back to you,
As we confess the shadows within.

Spring is in full flow,
A season of new life and new hope,
Yet the planet groans under the pressure of humanity,
And our demands on her resources.

We speak of your inclusive love,
Yet there are so many times when we deny or ignore your love,
You call us to love others,
And yet there are times we struggle to even politely welcome.
We confess that we are created in your image
Yet we work so hard at trying to create you in our image,
To limit you with our finite understanding.

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Forgive us, God
Send your Spirit to take our neglect, our brokenness and our denial
May she weave them into a new pattern
That sets us free from our old ways,
And strengthens us to make amends and reconcile.
Help us to live again as whole people,
In Christ we pray.
Amen

Words of Assurance

The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. God's wisdom offers us mercy, forgiveness and freedom, our sin is forgiven we are called to live as the free people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Doxology

CH 772

In The Lord I'll be Ever Thankful

Service of the Word

Readings

1st reading

Proverbs 1:20 - 33

The Call of Wisdom

2nd reading

Mark 8:27 - 38

**Peter's Declaration about Jesus &
Jesus Foretells His Death
& Resurrection**

This is the Living Word

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Anthem

Sermon

Our reading today follows on from the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. We're alerted that Jesus and the disciples are now heading deeper in to the territory of the

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tetrarch Philip¹ as we're told that they arrive in the villages of Caesarea Philippi.² This district was a major Hellenistic City suggested to control an extensive territory, and was understood to be a region that "reflected the Herodian sell out to Hellenism."³ In the ancient world this was the town of Paneas, named from a grotto sacred to Pan.⁴ The city itself was rebuilt by Herod Philip, it's naming intentional in a bid to distinguish it from the coastal seat of Roman Government, Caesarea.⁵

We're reminded that this is a discipleship journey with the use of; "on the way,"⁶ a benign yet a significantly symbolic term. It is here that Jesus asked; 'Who do people say that I am?'⁷ The response reveals that people place him clearly in the line of the prophets who brought the word of God to the people.⁸ While this identification is impressive it remains quite inadequate, and so Jesus moves on to ask; 'But who do you say that I am?'⁹ It's here that Peter makes his confession, Jesus is 'ὁ Χριστός,'¹⁰ the Christ, the Messiah.¹¹ Rather than jumping for joy at the fact that Peter gets it, well for now at least, Jesus sternly commands the disciples to keep quiet,¹² and he launches into the reality of what lies ahead, referring to himself as the "Son of Man," Jesus discloses that he *must* undergo suffering, rejection and be killed, but will rise again after three days.¹³ In taking Jesus aside to rebuke him, it seems that Peter is trying to be a little discreet, alas it backfires with Jesus now rebuking Peter and referring to him as Σατανᾶ,¹⁴ (Satanâ) so adversary

¹ Myers

² NRSV Mark 8:27

³ Myers

⁴ Sherwin-White in Myers

⁵ Myers

⁶ NRSV Mark 8:27

⁷ NRSV Mark 8:27

⁸ Ringe in Feasting on the Word & NRSV Mark 8:28

⁹ NRSV Mark 8:29a

¹⁰ Greek New Testament Mark 8:29

¹¹ NRSV Mark 8:29

¹² NRSV Mark 8:30

¹³ NRSV Mark 8:31

¹⁴ Greek New Testament Mark 8:33

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or satan-like man¹⁵ suggesting that Peter's focus is on human things rather than divine.¹⁶

He then calls the crowd and the disciples outlining and offering the bleak and paradoxical call to discipleship - need to deny themselves, take up the cross, save life will lose, lose life will save, for what profit is to gain the world and forfeit life?¹⁷ He concludes; 'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'¹⁸ Up until this point Jesus has been teaching, healing and exorcising and we've heard the tension building between himself and the religious authorities.¹⁹

Our reading today marks the midway in the gospel and from this point on Jesus is making the inevitable journey to Jerusalem, although not yet named at this point.²⁰ The whole reading poses questions about identity and lifestyle. This gospel was written decades after Jesus ministry,²¹ the audience lived in the shadow of the Jewish/Roman war and it was clear that Jesus had not freed the people from the oppression and domination of the Roman Empire.²² As Peter rebukes Jesus after his disclosure, Peter's misunderstanding becomes deafening, in his revealing that he must suffer Jesus redefines what is meant by Messiah, this title no longer points to triumphant military type power, but will now be associated with suffering, humiliation, torture and death. ²³

This disclosure of the idea that Jesus "must" undergo suffering, rejection and death has led to theologians trying to decipher what is meant by the "must." Has it ever been a question we have taken time to consider or do we sit passively in the traditional understanding of "Jesus died for our sins" end of? Following the back and forth rebukes Jesus continues with the paradox and reality of life as a disciples. One of the challenges is to 'take up the cross,' now this wasn't the broad metaphor that it's become today referring to the general burden of hardship, it meant death, a

¹⁵ Strong's

¹⁶ NRSV Mark 8:33

¹⁷ NRSV Mark 8:34-36

¹⁸ NRSV Mark 8:37-38

¹⁹ Ringe in Feasting on the Gospel

²⁰ Van Dyk in Connections

²¹ Borg

²² Ringe in Feasting on the Gospel

²³ Moore-Keish in Feasting on the Word

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particularly painful, shameful and prolonged death,²⁴ a public death that also served as a warning to anyone who may consider defying the empire, it really is a wonder that the disciples continued to follow him.

Anyhoo, the question of identity and lifestyle is as relevant and challenging today as it was then - I know the reality is that we're not going to be publicly nailed to a cross, but this call to follow, to deny self and pick up our cross is still the call to us so we have to ask; 'who is Jesus, who are we following?' What do we mean by Messiah?' How do we understand the 'must' suffer, be rejected, killed and rise again? What does it mean for us to deny self?

There is always the risk of assumption, assumption that language and understandings of God, Jesus and discipleship are universal - if I say I hold a Christian faith then I hold the values of X, Y, Z, but as our faith tradition has grown it's not really that simple. Let's begin with considering what it means to deny ourselves. "My identity is in Christ," oh my, we've all probably heard it but what does it mean, is this the easy option of denying self? We must be challenged to reflect deeply on such a call, for hundreds of years enslaved Africans were taught to deny themselves, to endure their lot because there's was the will of God.²⁵ People with the LGBTIQ+ community have been forced to deny themselves if they want to be part of the faith community. How is any of this good news or freeing? Obviously how we understand Jesus will impact on how we understand what it is to deny self. In my reflecting on this I understand Jesus to be calling the disciples to embrace a new understanding of identity, one that reflects the radical new social order, one that relinquishes that which harms, I belie it is about being free from the constraints of society and embracing the identity we have as created in the image of God.

To pick up our cross, yes it is more of the broader meaning today, thank God, yet it is still a call, in my opinion, to take risks, to be prepared to take the radical pathway that may lead to ridicule, rejection. It's a challenge to stand on the margins and speak out, to stand in solidarity with people who are experiencing injustice, to seek non-violent ways to achieve real peace. In words this all sounds very easy but it's not for the faint hearted. When we stand for love the risk is we attract hate.

Have we ever asked the question, who is the Jesus that we follow? What do we mean by messiah? (Very hard not to break into the life of Brian here!) Again we can assume a universality when it comes to language but the reality is we all, whether

²⁴ Borg

²⁵ Van Dyk in Connections

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people of Easter faith, other religions and indeed no religion, hold an understanding or opinion of who Jesus/God is or is not.

There are the classic images of Jesus that warm the cockles of our hearts, and to some degree have become idols such as; Jesus with a lamb draped across his shoulders, a child on his knee, the blue eyed dark blonde Jesus who looks like his hair has been blow dried. The idea that he may have been a bit dishevelled, messy hair, scatty beard and middle eastern in appearance is not an image we see around the place, yet it's probably the most accurate. As for God, usually an image of an old man with a long beard, sitting on a thrones with a pet lion comes to mind.

As for titles, we often attribute titles that are more often than not particularly masculine titles that conjure up powerful military and political images such as, King, Lord, Master. Yes, Jesus was male but God is beyond gender, God is woman wisdom, Spirit, Love, Wind, Fire, God is so much more than a man, Joan Chittister suggests that we have reduced God to one of the tiniest elements of creation.

Have we asked why Jesus "must" suffer, etc? Again a general understanding among many and what we've all been told at some point in our journey is that Jesus had to suffer and die in our place for our sins. That really doesn't sit with me, the image of God that portrays goes against what I have come to understand about the God revealed in Jesus and so I've wrestled with it. For me the "must" is about the fact that Jesus inaugurated a new way of being in the world, a way of justice, peace through non-violence, a way of compassion and love. For me the "must" comes from the understanding that Jesus' steadfast commitment to the way, to the kingdom of God, means that it will inevitably lead to suffering and in context death, because the alternative involves succumbing to the powers and principalities of the world, to be separate from God and that's just not an option.

Our language and perceptions can cause conflict and pain to many, yet the way of Jesus is the way of Love, inclusion, do no harm and is about recognising the divine image within each other. As followers of Jesus we must wrestle with the questions. What I've shared today has come from my wrestling with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it means to participate in and be a person of the Way. Every single one of us must wrestle with the questions of life and faith. As a community our preconceptions of who Jesus is, who the messiah is, what it means to be deny self etc needs to be challenged, we must set our minds on the divine not the human and that dear friends is the simple yet complex truth of the matter, because to focus on God and the kingdom runs radically and contrary to the way of the world.

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Prayer

Ancient mother, you birthed the whole of creation and you called it good. Send your Spirit upon us, may she fill us with wisdom and a questioning heart that begs us to come explore, seek the truth and seek the love that is Jesus, that is God. Amen

Hymn **CH 115** **Love is the Touch**

Prayers for the People & Lord's Prayer

...And as a sign of sacred unity, we join together in the prayer;

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

Peace

Sending Forth the People of God

Hymn **CH 247** **Moved by the Gospel**

Words of Mission & Blessing

Let us go into the world,
focussing on our call, asking the questions.
Let us be challenged by the way of the Kingdom,
Prepared to let go of images that have become idols.
Let us remember always that the way of the Kingdom is Love.

May the blessing of God be the divine breath and energy of life that surrounds us
May the blessing of Jesus be the challenge to relinquish all that harms
And may the blessing of Sophia enfold us with peace, as she guides us on the
journey of compassion and love in the world.
Amen

Shalom to You

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Postlude

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