

JESUS THE MESSIAH – BUT NOT AS WE EXPECTED (Matthew 16:21-28)

Our reading this morning is a continuation of last week's gospel reading. You will remember that Jesus has taken the 12 disciples across the Sea of Galilee and right up to the north of the country to a place called Caesarea Phillipi. And there he speaks to them about who he is.

He asks them two questions.
Who do people say I am?
Who do you say I am?

And I wonder how we would respond today? Imagine you are having a dinner party at your house and you said to the guests, 'Who do you say Jesus is?' I wonder what their response would be? I wouldn't be surprised if the answer is similar to what the people said in Jesus' day - that Jesus was a great teacher or like one of the prophets. Some of them said that Jesus was John the Baptist – may be because of his righteous living. Others said Elijah. The Jews believe that Elijah would herald the arrival of the coming Messiah. And still other folk said that Jesus was Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. May be they had seen Jesus' passion for his people, when he wept over Jerusalem or mourning for his friend Lazarus.

But Jesus cuts to the chase with his disciples. He asks them, 'but who do you say I am?' And that is a question we should ask ourselves.

Interestingly only one disciple replies in the affirmative.

Peter exclaims to Jesus, 'You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God!' And Jesus says to Peter, 'Yes, Peter, you are right and this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in Heaven.'

This was quite an utterance from Peter. He is top of the class among his disciples – and then we get to our reading this morning. Just as Peter begins to shine, he puts his foot in it. Peter recognised Jesus as God but failed to understand the implications of his Messiahship.

And I wonder whether this has ever happened to you? Has God not met with your expectations of Him? And if he hasn't, why hasn't he? You see, if we think God is going to be some sort of sugar-daddy or fairy godmother and do exactly what we expect, we are going to be disappointed. And this happens over and over again with Christians. Everything is fine until bad things happen, until suffering arrives. And many people begin to doubt. They begin to doubt God's love for them. But God has never said that by follow him we will have an easy life. In fact, our reading this morning says the opposite.

In verse 24 Jesus says to his disciples, 'If you want to become my followers you have to take up your cross and follow me.' This is crazy to Peter. Peter was expecting an all-conquering Messiah to flush out their Roman overlords. Jesus puts them straight on the implications of his Messiahship. And what is so interesting about our Gospel reading this morning is the beginning of verse 21. It says, 'From that time on', Jesus began to show his disciples what it means to be his followers.

From that time on, from that point onwards, Peter and the rest of the disciples realised that the Messiah must suffer (and die). Peter did not like this idea at all. Yet it was to fulfil what was written in the prophets (Isaiah 53:5) and if Jesus hadn't suffered and died then Peter would have died in his sins, and his sins would not have been forgiven.

This is why Peter receives a stern rebuke from Jesus when he tries to stop Jesus in his tracks. Unbeknown to Peter, the devil was using him to frustrate God's plan for the salvation of the world. The devil is constantly trying to blot out God's purposes in our lives, and Peter inadvertently was doing the same with Jesus. And so he receives a scolding from Jesus.

'Get behind me Satan' You are stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' (Matt. 16:23)

You see God's purpose in our lives is not to remove us from suffering. Jesus warns us that, 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' (verse 25). Suffering is a part of this life and we need to accept that – and God has promised that he will help us through it (Matt. 11:28). God did not take Shadrach Meshach and Abednego out of the fiery furnace but was in there with them. Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace and cried, 'I see not three but four and the fourth looks like the son of God.' (Daniel 3:24). Our Lord steps into the cauldron, into the furnace, that this life can sometimes bring.

Yet despite what it said in the Hebrew scriptures, Peter and the disciples were initially disappointed with the idea of a suffering Messiah, a suffering God. He was expecting a great conquering hero, a sort of Charlemagne, an Alexander or a King David, who was going to vanquish Israel's foes.

What a disappointment! When I was younger I used to look at my father's cap badge. He was an Army Chaplain and on the insignia was the words from Constantine's vision prior to battle, 'In this sign conqueror' as Constantine looked up from his charger and saw a vision of the cross in the skies, prior to battle. It was this type of military leader that Peter and

all of Ancient Israel was expecting in the Messiah. They were disappointed. Jesus came to bring peace and goodwill to all men, not just Israel. (Luke 2:14). Another lesson the disciples had to learn.

And so the full implications of our Lord's Messiahship was initially a disappointment to Peter and the disciples. But had the disciples gone down that road all they would have succeeded in doing would have been to raise a rebellion that would have been mercilessly crushed by the Romans. It would have been another Jewish insurrection doomed to disaster. God's plans for this rough and tumble group of Galilean men was so much greater (Isaiah 58:8-9).

And so Jesus explains to them what it means to be his followers. (verse 24)

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (NIV)

This is one of the dominant and re-occurring themes of Jesus' teaching. If we are to truly embrace the Christian life we must be prepared to be like our Saviour and deny ourselves. This is not so much the denial of a certain pleasure or luxury but rather saying no to self and yes to God. From this point onwards the disciples had to deny themselves. They had to dethrone self and enthrone God in their lives. Their lives from this point onwards was to be a life of constant self-denial and constant assent to God. This meant abandoning personal ambition to serve Christ. For the disciples it meant a 'letting go' of fighting their Roman overlords and allowing God's will to be done in their lives. God would deal with the Romans at another time.

And so we too must be like Christ and the disciples and take up our cross. We must take up the burden of sacrifice in our lives. This may well mean sacrificing the comfort of the fireside, the pleasure of a visit to the cinema, in place of serving the church, such as on the PCC, as a church-warden or treasurer, or helping out at the youth club. By taking up our cross and sacrificing our own dreams and ambitions we may find that the earthly reward is small and the prestige non-existent. Yet Jesus calls us daily to take up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23).

The really important thing is not the great moments of sacrifice but a life lived in the constant hourly awareness of the demands of God and the needs of others.

AMEN.