

**PENTECOST 16B, 12-09-2021** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Proverbs 1.20-33; Psalm 19; James 2.18-26;

Mark 8.27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.'

When we meet someone for the first time, the usual thing to do is exchange names. Then, if we get into a conversation, we might ask questions, like "Do you live around here? Where did you go to school?" or even "Are you a Dockers or an Eagles supporter?" So we get to know one another and find out what sort of people we are.

When Jesus asked his friends "Who do people say that I am?" he wanted to know what they'd heard. They'd been travelling around together for a while by then, teaching and healing and preaching in the towns and villages.

The disciples reported that folks had different ideas about Jesus. Some thought he was another prophet, like John the Baptist or Elijah. So he asked them: "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter gave the right answer: "You are the Messiah" (or the Christ: both words mean the same).

In Mark's gospel, this is the first time a human voice has declared who Jesus really is. This is a pivotal point in Mark's telling of the story, the climax of the first half of the gospel. Everything begins to change after this moment, as Jesus heads for Jerusalem and his journey to the cross.

Jesus began to teach that he must suffer and be rejected and be killed; but he would rise and live again. Somehow Peter must have missed the bit about rising again, because he took Jesus to one side and told him off.

Presumably he was shocked by what Jesus had said, which is quite understandable! How could the Messiah, the promised one, allow himself to get killed? He couldn't save Israel if he was dead!

Jesus responded with a now-famous rebuke of his own: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter must have wondered what hit him.

Peter got it right when he declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, but his understanding of the meaning of the title was wrong. He, along with many of his time, thought that the Messiah would come from God and lead Israel out of bondage to Rome. The Messiah would be a great king, like David, a military leader who would make Israel great again and turn the world towards Jerusalem - home of the one true God.

Jesus spent a lot of time trying to explain to people that he was not that kind of messiah. This was a disappointment to some who no longer wanted to be followers.

When Jesus told the crowd “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”, he was saying something about the kind of messiah he was. To be a disciple, he said, it is necessary to understand that this Messiah is not going to bring in God’s kingdom by force or violence or politics, but by love and self-giving.

Peter, the disciples, the first followers of Jesus and every Christian since then must understand the difference between what we would like Jesus, the Messiah, to be and do, and who he actually is. It is easy for us to have an image of Jesus that suits us and fits in with what we need and want. But we need to grow beyond childish ideas about Jesus, in the same way that we need to grow out of childish ideas about our parents.

When we are little, we believe that our parents know everything, are all-powerful and will always protect and care for us. As we grow up we realise that they are only human- they make mistakes, they can’t actually do everything, and we can then begin to have an adult relationship with them that is based on reality.

If our image of Jesus is based on a Sunday-school fantasy of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, we will be unable to grow into mature faith in the actual Messiah.

To follow this Jesus has radical political, social, and economic ramifications, because we too must care for the poor, the sick, the disadvantaged and the stranger.

As the letter of James tells us, faith without works is dead. It isn’t enough to say we believe in Jesus- we must do the things he told us to do. He told us to love one another, as he has loved us; and he showed us what love looks like in the way he lived and died.

‘Messiah’ or ‘Christ’, Hebrew or Greek, are versions of the same word. This is more than a straightforward human title; it is a description of a mystery that involves suffering and death, bearing the cross and losing life- so that life in the end might be saved.

If we are to be followers of Christ and to teach our children and others to do the same, we must acknowledge that taking up our cross is part of the journey. Jesus never promised us a rose garden; his garden was Gethsemane.

But as he told Peter, resurrection follows, so in losing life- real life is found. There is a cost to discipleship, as there is to anything worth having. The cost will be different for each person; God calls us and gives us gifts for a variety of ministries. For all who want to follow Jesus there are choices and decisions to be made.

The paradox is that in losing our lives- by giving them back to God- we find Life, life with a capital ‘L’, and eternal life at that!

When we were baptised, we made promises, or they were made on our behalf. We promised to die to the old way of being and be born into the new way, the way of transformation as individuals and as a community.

May we continue to grow into our baptismal promises and choose to follow Jesus all the days of our lives. The Lord be with you.