

SUNDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2024 - HOLY CROSS SUNDAY

16th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 50.4-9; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-end

Holy Cross Sunday

Philippians 2.6-11; John 3.13-17

Before talking about Holy Cross day I'm going to start today by looking at the readings for Trinity 16, which we would have read, because they fit very well with what we have heard today, from Philippians and John: from the letter of James chapter 3 and from Mark's Gospel chapter 8. That Gospel begins with the phrase:

Who do YOU say that I am ? That is the question Jesus puts to his own disciples, after asking them what other people are saying. Who do YOU say that I am ? Supposing I asked you "who do you think Jesus Christ was or rather is ?" How would you reply ? Well, you might say the same as Peter did, although the word he used – Messiah - had more to do with what the Jews had been expecting for centuries before Jesus was born, encouraged by prophets like Isaiah and Daniel. However, what he said was fairly remarkable because he did not have the benefit of hindsight as we do. So in response to the same question, we would be able to say "Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Son of God", and you might add "the second person of the Trinity", the other two being God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

In case you think I am being pedantic, this is not just an academic exercise. It matters a great deal how we respond when other people, who may or may not be Christians, want to know from us who Jesus Christ is and why we believe in him.

Before we try and answer that question, which leads us automatically to the Holy Cross, let's look at the Gospel passage we would have read this morning. In the commentaries about it there is some speculation that in

answering Jesus's question "Who do you say that I am?" with the reply "You are the Messiah", and not with the reply "You are the Son of God", Peter is misunderstanding or more likely not fully realising the real meaning behind Jesus's existence on earth; and as I said a moment ago, Peter and the other disciples could not yet realise that full meaning, in the way we can.

This is surely the reason why Jesus then begins to teach his disciples that he would have to undergo great suffering and death – and after three days rise again. Peter, ever impetuous, takes exception to this idea and is sternly reprimanded by Jesus, who tells him that he is seeing things in purely human terms rather than divine ones. He goes on to explain what this means: to follow Jesus is to deny oneself, in other words to put the interests of others above our own. The words are stark – saving rather than losing our life for the sake of others makes it look as though it is a question of physical life or death. In extreme circumstances that may happen, but mainly it is a question of doing something for the common good – like being a volunteer for the many charities which exist today, locally or nationally, and which are always crying out for volunteers. That's about loving our neighbour as ourselves, not neglecting ourselves but finding ourselves in loving service for others. Otherwise we run the risk of being among those who are ashamed of Jesus, with the result that Jesus will also be ashamed of us when our time comes.

But there is more to why we should follow Jesus, and this is what the disciples could not yet know. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, which they simply cannot understand, lead to the promise of forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life; God in Jesus has shared our suffering and continues to share it. This is the reason why we should love God, and as God created us all in his own loving image, so we seek to love our neighbour as ourselves.

And so to the Holy Cross, that crudest of all punishments in the Roman world. Everything we have referred to so far this morning leads us to it, in

fact everything in our lives leads us to it, and everything leads from it. What did it achieve ? The answer is everything, everything that matters: for example, the love which flows from it in terms of gaining a respite of forgiveness of our mistakes and failings, if we say sorry, which we have done once more this morning at the beginning of this service.

Then there is the love which promises eternal life with God and Jesus, which we struggle to understand until our turn comes when we shall see God face to face and all our worldly cares vanish into that moment of joy. That joy also encompasses the souls of those we have loved and see no more.

So the Cross holds significant importance for all Christians, no matter which denomination we represent: on it Jesus was crucified and sacrificed for us all, and therefore it is an important symbol. We see it in many places, not only in churches but around people's necks, and we make the sign of the Cross on ourselves and bow to the Cross in our liturgy.

When I stand ready to receive Communion it is the Cross I am looking at. When you reflect or look at the Cross I wonder what you are thinking about; perhaps you are reminding yourself how powerful it is that Jesus died for each one of us, taking away our sins, comforting us in our sorrow, being made anew. God has taken what could be a terrible symbol of death and made it a symbol of love and hope. In other words it serves as a reminder of the kind of life we are to live as Christians. We are to take up our own individual crosses and follow him, enabling us to be involved in God's mission in the world, doing whatever good works he has prepared for us to do.

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