

# In the end, the reality is Love ... ..

*... the Love revealed by the Christ we worship.*

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*A sermon given on Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, 12th September 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service Mark 8:27-end*

Yesterday, of course, was the 20th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. A reminder, if any were needed of the destructive power of religion. For many people, believers and unbelievers alike, God seems to be all about power, and if you feel excluded and marginalised and left out, then God can be very attractive as a source of power, which can turn the tables on the established order and those who seem to be in control. But if you are part of that established order, then God can seem very dangerous and should be rejected. And so fundamentalism and atheism turn out to be two sides of the same coin - both believe God is about power. And for some people that's attractive and for others, it's alarming. Interestingly, one of the areas in today's world where atheism is growing fastest is in parts of the Muslim world, especially Iran, where moderate educated people are turned off by the way Islam has been presented in fundamentalist ways, as if simply saying 'God is great', is a way of ending the argument and silencing your enemies. But the other major trend in many parts of the Muslim world is for people to turn to Christianity because that is seen as a way of believing in God, which doesn't have to involve the abuse of power - assuming of course, that the Christianity concerned is not of that variety which says the Bible is black and white and perfectly clear in its teachings and if you disagree, you are going to hell.

And we see precisely this discussion in this morning's gospel reading in the exchange between Jesus and Peter. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the anointed son of God, the Messiah; and Jesus then predicts that he will undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. In other words, Jesus is saying the way of the Messiah, the way of God, is the way of costly self-giving - there are no shortcuts to victory. But Peter says, in effect, "No way." He rebukes Jesus for saying such a thing. How can God's Messiah possibly be subject to failure to suffering and death? God is great. If you're God's Messiah, you will be successful and victorious; you will

be all powerful and conquering; and God's enemies (which in those days was the Romans) had better look out because they're in for a good kicking. That seems to be Peter's view of God: that if you are special in God's sight, then God will lead you on a path of glory and your problems will be overcome, your enemies defeated and success guaranteed.

So let me ask you this morning, is that how you see God? Is that what you think religious people are like?

Notice how Jesus then responds to Peter. He says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus is saying that Peter has become the mouthpiece of the devil himself for suggesting that God is all about power and that the Son of God cannot suffer and die. And he goes on to suggest that those who want to follow Jesus must deny themselves and take up their own cross in order to do so - you can't find your life unless you're first of all prepared to lose it, by surrendering your ego and humbly giving yourself up to the way of Christ.

So whether you're a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, or whatever, in the end, it seems there are only two kinds of religion. There is the religion of Peter, which is looking for answers, for certainty, for power, for solutions to problems; and there is the religion of Jesus, which is much more complicated - although in the end it's very simple, because it is all about love, which in a messed up world involves giving yourself away; putting others first; allowing people to be different; showing Grace and mercy and forgiveness and compassion. Because these are the things that lead in the end, to life - real life - and not just the illusion of power.

It's really good that the veterans of the Prince of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire are here with us today because I think they will understand that kind of paradox. On the face of it, it doesn't make sense that in order to establish peace, you sometimes have to rely on people who are willing to fight. It's not easy to get your head around that - it seems inconsistent. But if you can understand that, maybe you can handle the paradox that the way to fullness of life, the way to grow into our full humanity and become the people God made us to be, is found actually by denying ourselves; surrendering our wills; humbly acknowledging our spiritual helplessness; taking up our cross and following Christ; aiming to win life by losing the world.

So let me ask you this morning, 'Which way are you going? Which religion do you follow? -the way of Peter or the way of Jesus?'

One way believes in God, but turns him into a dangerous idol; the other way also believes in God, but a God of love, which makes it a religion that is much more difficult but more real, because in the end, the reality is love - the love revealed in the Christ we have come to worship today.

And so as Jesus asked Peter, so he asks you and me this morning, "Who do you say that I am?" And the follow up question is, "What kind of a Messiah do you really believe in?"

## Reading Text

Mark 8:27-End

<sup>27</sup> 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?' <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' <sup>29</sup> He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' <sup>30</sup> And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> 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.' <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> 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.'