

Jesus the Messiah...

... the cost of following Jesus

A sermon given on the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, 15th September 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8:27-end

"Who do you say that I am?"

Who is Jesus Christ? This is the central question not only of our gospel this morning, but of everyone in the minister this morning and of all people around the world. The answer, whatever one believes it is, has radical consequences for everyone.

Peter correctly answers this question, *"You are the Messiah."* But while Peter is correct in his answer, it quickly becomes clear in his rebuking of Jesus that he really doesn't know what it means to be the Messiah. For Peter, like many others at the time, the Messiah was believed to be the conquering king, the one who would kick out the Romans, would unite the tribes of Israel, and go on a march of conquest and colonisation. And so he is shocked when Jesus reveals the true role of the Messiah - that he must undergo great suffering; be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed; and after three days, rise again. All this is to say, the Messiah is not to be the conquering king many were expecting, but instead is to be the suffering servant, the one prophesied in our reading from Isaiah this morning, which reads:

"The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious. I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not to hide my face from insulting and spitting."

The suffering servant, the Messiah, is the one who endures humiliation and abuse out of obedience to God, who willingly offers his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pluck his beard, who does not hide his face from shame and spit, who stands at the periphery, who is marginalised, who confronts the godless, the power-hungry, and the money-obsessed with a call to change. To be the Messiah is to be the suffering servant.

This message was as poorly received 2,000 years ago as it is around much of the world today. In our own day we have many Peters - those who twist, warp, and misuse Jesus's messiahship to their own end. - in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church defended the invasion on the grounds that they were fighting a holy war. In these

instances, we see those who like Peter misused Jesus's messiahship to their own ends - the ends of destruction and power and in the process, deny the true Messiahship of Christ.

A mentor of the theologian Karl Barth once said, 'One can think and teach rightly about Christ only if they have already begun to live according to Christ's gospel.' So how are we to live according to Christ's gospel? How are we to live out the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah? How are we to serve the suffering servant?

Right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, Jesus called his disciples by saying, "*Follow me.*" And only in the reading this morning do we see the true cost of that mission. Jesus tells us the three requirements of discipleship, "*If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" - denying oneself means putting aside self-interest and personal desire; to carry one's cross means to willingly accept the shame and disgrace that may come with discipleship - it can mean fighting, if necessary, to maintain peace and defend those who cannot defend themselves even if it's unpopular. And the final requirement of discipleship is to follow Jesus. This one may seem obvious but as Peter demonstrated, it's often difficult to discern what exactly it means to follow Jesus Christ.

So if we are to truly follow Jesus, this means living up to the requirements of the suffering servant, putting aside self-interest, enduring difficulties and humiliations, and so being obedient to Christ no matter the cost.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴ *The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.*

*Morning by morning he wakens --
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.*

⁵ *The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.*

⁶ *I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.*

⁷ *The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;*

⁸ *he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?*

*Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.*

⁹ *It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.*

Mark 8:27-end

²⁷ *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?'* ²⁸ *And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'* ²⁹ *He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'* *Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'* ³⁰ *And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.* ³¹ *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.* ³² *He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.* ³³ *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.'* ³⁴ *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.* ³⁵ *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.*

³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ 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.¹