

Trinity XVI (Proper 19/24 OT) 2018

The Gospel reading today leads us to a profound moment in the journey of the disciples. In much the same way we have a moment of change for Jesus in our Gospel reading last week when he was challenged by an outsider – the Syrophenician woman – today, he himself challenges the disciples. Again a shift takes place and this passage is represented as the moment when Mark represents Jesus as starting the journey towards Jerusalem – Passion, Death and Resurrection. – setting his face towards Jerusalem, as Luke puts it.

The curious thing about this account in Mark is its dispassionate nature. It almost seems matter-of-fact in the way this pivotal moment occurs. In fact, the Confession of Peter – the moment he declares that Jesus is the Messiah, seems almost dispassionate and almost matter-of-fact. Yet all is not what it seems.

The whole of Mark's Gospel, like the others, is a document of great subtlety and thought-out theology, designed to enable the reader (or hearer) to answer for themselves that question Jesus asks his disciples: 'Who do you say I am.' In order for us to explore such a question, we must read the Gospel, thus far in order to see where Mark leads us. You will remember that he starts the whole Gospel unequivocally with the words – 'The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' There are no 'ifs', no 'buts' for Mark, but the journey he leads us on is one where every detail matters because as we read or hear the Gospel, the journey Jesus becomes OUR journey, as we observe the way that those in the Gospel also respond to the Lord.

Last week, the word was 'Ephphatha' – 'be opened'. Open your ears – open your minds – and then your mouth, as you take on board the Gospel message. Today, I think that it helps us to know what passage which comes immediately before Peter's Confession, which is for some reason (probably brevity) left out of the Lectionary reading. However, it is important because it too helps us garner further understanding of our response to the question Jesus poses when he asks, 'Who do you say I am?'

Mark gives us an account of a blind man who friends bring to Jesus, asking the Lord to touch him. As in last week's account of the deaf man, Jesus uses spit to touch the man's eyes – meeting us in our humanity. But it takes two goes before the man's sight is fully restored and he is enabled to clearly. A question: surely, if Jesus was and is the Messiah, why would he have needed two efforts at healing the man? After all, in most of the Gospel accounts, the miracles work immediately – they are usually instantaneous. Is Jesus having an off-day and only working on half power?

But if we go down this path we miss the whole **point** of the story (as well as to ignoring Mark's theological and literary ingenuity), because what is central to this account is not the healing, but the man's response when Jesus asks him what he sees. It is about faith- and illustrates the way in which this is rarely an instantaneous gift – for most of us, we must journey in faith, waiting on the Lord, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us into further understanding – something that goes on for the whole of one's life.

When Jesus asks the disciples, *'Who do the people say that I am,'* he is asking them the same question he asked the blind man; *'What is it that you observe? How are people responding to my message thus far?'* We are given the list of what the disciples hear people saying about the identity of Jesus – he is John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the other prophets. These, however, are rather like the indistinct figures the blind man has initially seen. Then Peter grasps the nettle – **'You are the Messiah.'** BUT this answer is informed not just from what they have seen, heard or experienced of Jesus's ministry thus far, but also on their own understanding of the Messiah – the longed-for saviour of the Jewish people; a warrior who would overturn the Roman occupation and re-establish the throne of David.

Jesus immediately shuts this understanding down as he says: *'the Son of Man who 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,'* ordering them not to tell a soul of his identity. It is about as far removed from the Biblical understanding of the Messiah as it can possibly be, and it is small wonder that Peter loses his temper in the most human way. He is like the blind man before his sight is fully restored – he still has a considerable journey to make in order to understand the full identity of Jesus. It will involve Peter losing his temper more than once, denying Jesus three times, questioning the Risen Lord – all shaping Peter's growing understanding, and it's a life-long journey. That's why I thank God for Peter – so human, so many foibles, so many faults. It gives us all hope!

Now Jesus gives us the truest understanding of the Messiah, together with the role of those who profess themselves to be his followers. *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.'* It seems a gloomy sentence – and how on earth could anyone live up to what Jesus asks? We have to journey further and carry on journeying.

In denying self, I believe that, with God's grace, Jesus is calling us to rid ourselves of any course of action that is based on self-centred, self-seeking or is about self-affirmation – in other words, we should allow ourselves to seek the will of God above our own.

In taking up the cross we are called to put a death to our own self-aggrandisement, allowing those parts of our character which we know to be self-focussed to die a death.

Taking up our cross means always welcoming the Holy Spirit to lead us continually to new life in the knowledge that Jesus travels with us every step of the way. This can sometimes be a costly journey, but ultimately draw us into the heart of God, because the constancy of the presence of the Lord never fails. It is all to do with our response. We are called to transformation in the light of the Cross.

The Lord says to each of us, *'Follow me,'* – follow me on a journey which constantly leads into the new life of the Kingdom towards the heart of God's Love – a love made known to us as Jesus gives himself for each of us and indeed for the whole of humanity.



The Heavenly Jerusalem – East window of All Saints' Falmouth – Leonard Pownall 1911

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴The 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.

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

⁶I 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.

⁷The 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?

James 3: 1-12

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water weald fresh.

Mark 8: 27-end

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.' 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, ³⁶ 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 ³⁷ 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.'