

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 15th Sunday after Trinity

12th September 2021

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I am still meeting people I haven't seen since our summer break, and we wish each other "une bonne rentrée". You may know that "la rentrée", the back-to-school time of the year is a very important affair in France - not only for teachers, professors, educators, kindergarten kids or students, but for many others. La rentrée is a turning point, we start a new journey, moving toward new horizons. Young people move on to the next grade; opposition and government have their "rentrée politique", with new matters to quarrel about; hundreds of writers are waiting for their new books to be dispatched to the bookstores for the "rentrée littéraire".

This is a season ripe with possibilities and expectations for new and important matters to be announced, new challenges to arise and opportunities for valuable learning to be offered. And it is, perhaps, the only time of the year when teachers take centre stage, bathing in a palpable light of hope and excitement about the guidance they will offer on the learning journey ahead.

Teachers were and are important in our lives, aren't they? They are so much more than mere dispensers of knowledge. They offer guidance, they can extend students' limits, stand by them to help overcome challenges, give them a gentle nudge in the right direction, and, when the moment is ripe, let students trace their own path. They can ask questions we sometimes live with for a long time. They can be a role model and inspire us to be life-long learners.

I am sure you have noticed that, rather often, Jesus was called "Teacher" - even in Mark's Gospel, which has in it very little teaching of the sort we find in Matthew

and Luke. There is point and force in Jesus' teaching, that is both public and personal. His most profound sayings burst forth out of his everyday ministry. Most of the teaching reported by Mark is spontaneous and happens "on the way", the journeying being a leitmotif of this Gospel, especially of its second part, that begins with the episode we read about this morning.

Almost exactly at the Gospel's midpoint, a major shift in Jesus' ministry takes place. The Twelve have been with Jesus for some time in Galilee and have seen him cure sick and lame people, cast out demons, feed crowds, even restore life to a young girl. They have undergone an intense apprenticeship with him. As Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, the Twelve are ready to move on to the next discipleship grade. They expect new challenges to arise, but also new opportunities for valuable learning to be offered.

As Jesus changes to this new phase of his ministry, he must begin to teach the disciples what to expect, because, at the end of this journey, he will die. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks. The disciples give sensible answers: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Jesus neither confirms nor denies any of their answers. Much of his ministry has clearly evoked these figures' legacy through his call to repentance, healings, and food provided in the wilderness. He simply listens to them, allowing them to offer everything they think they know, as if to say: "This is the place to begin. Now I have an important question: Who do you say that I am?".

Peter rushes to give an answer – he might have pondered it for some time: "You are the Messiah." We acknowledge this as technically accurate language - it is part of our profession of faith! Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah - the Christ. What Peter, and quite likely the other disciples too, have in mind, is a figure matching the first-century messianic hopes, a ruler who will purify the society, establish Israel's leading place among the nations, and usher in a new age of peace and holiness, all this accomplished by the possession and exercise of power. In brief, a glorious and victorious figure to whom defeat and suffering would be entirely foreign.

Jesus cannot accept a title bearing this implicit "job description". He will not deceive the Twelve. The time has come for them to be told about the cross of Christ, openly and boldly. This is a difficult lesson to listen to and cope with. Jesus upends everything they expect Messiah to be and to do. Jesus insists on identifying

with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer, to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal. The Son of Man would suffer as Isaiah had foretold in the Old Testament reading this morning.

From a human point of view, suffering, rejection and death makes no sense. Saint Paul will later say of the cross that it was foolishness and a stumbling block for both Jews and Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1.18-25). But from a divine perspective, it makes sense, as suffering and death are accompanied by resurrection.

The class is not over yet! Knowledge about Jesus' identity is useless if it remains abstract. As he discloses more and more about his identity and fate, Jesus also describes who the disciples should be, if they confess him as Messiah. Those who want to become his followers should deny themselves, take up their cross and walk in his steps. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah; the cost of discipleship, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, is high – are they willing to pay it?

When Mark wrote his Gospel in the first century, Christians were literally bearing crosses and losing their lives. The words of Jesus spoke directly to their situation. Christians reading this passage today in Afghanistan or northern Nigeria, for instance, have a depth of understanding which is hard to attain in the Western world.

Self-denial and cross-bearing language are counter-cultural in our society. Of course, we have watered it down. We call a life difficulty, like noisy neighbours, our cross to bear, and we think of cutting out chocolate during Lent as self-denial.

Rest assured: Jesus didn't encourage his followers to seek out suffering or martyrdom. He himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission.

Self-denial is refusing to bend all one's energies to preserving, securing, and enriching one's life in the world. It is not self-annihilation, but redefining one's identity to be coherent with our God's logic of sharing in our weakness, vulnerability, suffering and shame.

To take up one's cross means being willing to accept the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, putting his priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort; to accept embarrassment, shame, rejection, persecution because of our relationship with Christ; to embrace weakness instead of power; to live out the ethics of Christ

in the world, a world that is increasingly inhospitable to Christian values. To take up one's cross means to help carry the world's suffering, to take up our responsibilities as disciples, as seekers of justice and mercy, as peacemakers.

The question posed by Jesus – “Who do you say that I am?” – is one that must be asked of every generation. And of each of us. Don't rush with an answer. It's a question to ponder for a lifetime. The advice the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke gave to a young artist was: “Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. [...] Live the questions now. Perhaps, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.” (*Letters To A Young Poet, Letter no.4*)

“Who do you say that I am?” is at the same time, “who will you say that you are?” We are not only called to confess Jesus as Christ, but also to be disciples, that means, “learners”, perpetually listening, being taught by, and learning from, Christ.

The life of the disciple is a journey, the journey of learner on which, like Peter, we can express both our faith and, with honesty, our difficulty with Jesus' identity and mission, so that the Teacher can lead us on toward friendship with him in all eternity.

Amen.