

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 11th Sunday after Trinity – 23rd August 2020

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The Son of God

You have got to love Peter, don't you? I have always been a Peter-man rather than a Paul-man. I struggle to understand Paul - not so much his teachings, though I struggle a lot with those, but more who Paul was as a person. I feel that I know Peter and perhaps it is because he wears his heart on his sleeve. I am not impetuous or impulsive like Peter but I understand why he reacted the way he did. His instant response when Jesus called him with his brother to follow Him was "anybody want to buy a boat" and Peter was off. A couple of weeks ago it was Peter who leapt over the side of the boat and walked on water (the real miracle in that story). Last week it was Peter who asked for the parable to be explained. Next week it will be Peter trying to persuade Christ not to die. And shortly after that episode, it is Peter who offers to make booths for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus at the transfiguration. Later it was Peter who resisted Jesus washing his feet but was persuaded and said my favourite verse from Peter: "not just my feet but my head and my hands as well". It is the verse I say every time I come to receive communion. It was Peter who sliced off the ear of the servant in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter who denied ever knowing Christ after Jesus was arrested. After the resurrection of Jesus, it was Peter who leapt over the side of the boat again when he recognised Jesus on the beach but this time the boat was near the beach and the water was shallower. Shortly after this incident the same Peter was reconciled with Jesus and on who Jesus chose to build his church, which Peter proceeded to do after the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Quite a lad!

In our gospel passage today, we have Jesus asking his disciples who do people say that He is. They answer with the names of people who have died, John the Baptist, Elijah or other prophets. Then Jesus gets more personal and asks 'but who do you say that I am?' And it is Peter, who else, who says "You are the

Messiah, the Son of the living God". And Jesus says well done Peter for getting the right answer but this can only have been revealed to you by God Himself.

So, who is Jesus and what do these titles mean? The Messiah means the anointed one, a title that would be redolent with meaning for the Jewish people as they lived in the belief, foretold by the pre-exilic prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that God would create a regent (i.e. the Messiah) from the House of David to lead the Jewish people and the world and usher in an age of justice and peace when the God of Israel would be recognised as the only true God. After the post-exilic return to Jerusalem, these messianic ideas became more focused on the end-times when the dead would be resurrected and the Kingdom of Heaven would be established on earth. The messianic expectations also became increasingly focused on the figure of an individual saviour. The Messiah no longer symbolized the coming of the new age, but he was somehow supposed to bring it about. The Lord's anointed thus became the "saviour and redeemer". Interestingly, Jesus did not refer to Himself as the Messiah very often and that may be because at the time of Jesus the name Messiah had gained nationalistic and political overtones.

I also think that the Messiah the Jews were expecting was very different from the one that they got. Many Jews longed for a return to the glorious days of King David, when Israel was the greatest power in the Near East. They were at the time under Roman domination, had to pay oppressive taxes, and live within the pagan empire so it wasn't unreasonable for them to expect and hope for a conquering messiah particularly given what they read every day in the prophets and psalms. A rabbi from Galilee was not what they had in mind.

But it is what Peter added after he called Jesus the Messiah that is more meaningful for me. Peter called Jesus the son of the living God. The Messiah was expected to be a son of David and could have been called a son of man (the title Jesus typically used to describe Himself). But the son of God? That was quite a claim and it is an echo from a couple of weeks back to when Jesus walked on the sea and after Jesus climbed into the boat the disciples said 'truly you are the Son of God'.

This brings us to what for me is the tricky part of understanding the identity of Jesus, for, if we assume "like father like son", a common proverb meaning a son's character or behaviour can be expected to resemble that of his father, it brings our conception of God into play. Then we look for characteristics of God to be present in Jesus. I feel uncomfortable even raising the question as it is not as if

we are talking about this behind God's back. I am sure God is hearing, watching, waiting and probably smiling for we are attempting the impossible here.

I have talked about my love of the Trinity before. I feel I know the other two persons of the Trinity better than I know God. I know Jesus because He came to earth and became 100% human at the same time as being 100% divine. I know His being because of what He said and did whilst here on earth. I know the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit lives within me and is manifest and bearing fruit in my life on a daily basis. I need Jesus for my eternal life. I need the Holy Spirit for my daily life.

It is not that I need a physical image of God. I don't need that. I don't find the typical, bearded, white faced portrait of Jesus particularly helpful either. And I do know that the Old Testament is full of what God did and what God said but somehow Jesus feels more present, more immanent. It may be that part of my struggle is that the picture of God in the Old Testament is complex and multifaceted. God does acts of great mercy and kindness although He is not above brutal acts of punishment and wrath. He can change His mind or direction. Depending on your point of view, God could be seen as petty or unjust, vindictive or bloodthirsty, misogynistic or genocidal, judgemental and condemning. But what does not change is that God is unwaveringly and unreasonably forgiving even when His people commit the most egregious of sins. Like father, like son?

Given our difficulty in getting an accurate picture of God and deriving the identity of Jesus from that, it may be more helpful to think about the earthly Jesus, what He said and did, and especially His death on the cross and resurrection and allowing that to bring meaning to our understanding of both God and Jesus. Like son, like father.

The Jesus we see may be far from the vision of the expected messiah. He comes in humble beginnings. He comes to associate with and care for those on the periphery of society. He comes to challenge those who know the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law. He comes to serve not to be served. He is the messiah that weeps at the tomb of his friend and weeps over Jerusalem. And Jesus comes as the suffering servant. Dying a death of shame on the cross, the full glory of the Messiah is revealed in the suffering Jesus willingly endured as an expression of His immeasurable love for those He came to save and His triumph over the ultimate enemy death itself.

This man, who was and is God, laid aside the privileges of deity, faced loneliness and temptation. He hungered as a man yet fed four and five thousand. He thirsted as a man yet said whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst. He was weary as a man yet said come to me all you that are weary and I will give you rest. He weeps yet He wipes our tears. He pays his taxes yet He is a king. He prays yet He hears our prayers. He was sold for thirty pieces of silver yet He redeems the world. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter yet He is the good shepherd. He dies and by dying He gives us life.

There was never anyone quite like Jesus. But the question still remains: Who do you say that Jesus is? It is the single, most important question that we have to answer in our lives bar none.