

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**15<sup>th</sup> September 2024**

**Église Protestante Unie, Manosque**

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Over the last couple of weeks we have heard many people arguing why they or others should, or should not, be considered for a leadership role. The complicated negotiations that have followed the unexpected calling of legislative elections in France in the summer, the build-up to the American presidential election in November. The formation of a new government in the United Kingdom. Whether or not we are interested in politics, we all subconsciously find ourselves evaluating who we think we would be comfortable with in the role of a public leader, the sort of characteristics and priorities that we would want them to have.

In all of this, the very last thing any of those candidates has expressed – and, in our own evaluation of the desired characteristics, not the first thing we would think of either – is the sort of manifesto Jesus gave his disciples. As Messiah (or, as he preferred to refer to himself, the Son of Man), he must undergo great suffering, be rejected and killed. And, in case they haven't worked it out, that means risk and danger to his disciples too: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.’ It’s not about power, but about its loss. Not about status, but about its lack. The upside-down world of the Kingdom of God. Hardly designed to win recruits, one might think.

Our Gospel reading comes at a pivotal moment in St Mark’s account – the middle chapter, 8 of 16. At this midpoint, Mark has Peter come to the realisation of who Jesus really is. They are at Caesarea Philippi, in the northernmost part of the country, furthest from Jerusalem, before Jesus turns to begin the journey that will lead him there. It is here that he asks them: ‘who are people saying that I am?’ They mention three of the complimentary attributions, tactfully not mentioning some of the less flattering ones that were no doubt also around. Then he challenges them: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter rushes in with a spectacular answer: ‘You are the Messiah.’ And so the great secret is revealed, the one which Jesus was so anxious that no one should know. He is the anointed one, the one who will restore all things and bring about God’s future. Peter opens his mouth and gets it spectacularly right. But Jesus then goes on to explain what it really means. That he will undergo great suffering, be killed and rise again. Jesus is drawing on the prophetic tradition from Isaiah and other, writing during the exile of Israel in Babylon some five hundred years earlier.

But Peter has taken his understanding of the Messiah from other parts of Scripture, perhaps the literature of Daniel and the Macabees, where the anointed one was envisaged as a triumphant leader who would overthrow the occupying Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. Peter opens his mouth again and this time gets it spectacularly wrong. Jesus checks him in the strongest terms: ‘Get behind me, Satan.’ Peter is thinking in human terms and not God’s,

and Jesus pulls him up. From the same mouth comes true and false understandings. In the Letter of James, the writer comments on this human tendency. The tongue, though a tiny part of the body, is very powerful. We use it to bless and curse. We worship God but we also demean those who are made in God's image. Peter shows how easy it is to say both the right thing and the wrong thing within a few minutes.

There were many pressures on Jesus to do things differently. All around him were minor insurrections against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. Yet he chose the path of non-violent, active resistance and the creation of an alternative society within the apparent dominance of Rome. Non-violent resistance where people are oppressed is still the church's vocation – forming an alternative community that is about reconciliation.

Jesus's question is for all his followers, then and now. 'But who do you say that I am?' In church, we say that he is God of God, Light of Light, Lamb of God, Living Word, etc. But what do we say when we are away from church? Do those around us know that Jesus is Lord for us – in the things we do, the decisions we make, the words we speak?

Jesus told his followers that if they wished to follow him they must deny themselves and take up their cross. This meant putting him first, not thinking about what they wanted but what God wanted, for them and their community. It may mean travelling a difficult road, unsure of the future, not being in control, having to come to terms with suffering - but trusting that God can and will bring good out of the most difficult circumstances. Speaking a few days ago of the ending of her recent cancer treatment, the Princess of Wales used a biblical

image when she said: 'Out of darkness can come light.' She may or may not have been aware of it, but that is the whole message of the Gospel.

This week, let us think about the words we say in church and the words and actions we perform each day. Does it all hang together? Would others say that we are people of integrity? We all make mistakes, says the writer of the Letter of James. Peter is a good example of it. But Jesus challenged Peter and reminded him to do the work of God and side with truth. So let us check our words, our actions, think before we speak and listen for the voice of Jesus in our ear: 'But who do you say that I am?'

Amen.