

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 16th Sunday after Trinity

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All Saints' Marseille

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“Take up your cross and follow me!” A startling and very demanding command from their Teacher. Jesus’ disciples were surely not prepared for such a conclusion to the day’s teaching. The day had begun with a sense of ease for them, as they confidently answered his question, ‘Who do people say that I am?’

Considering their age, background, and professions, some among them may have found the idea of being taught rather intimidating. Yet, Jesus’ teaching method was suited to them. Instead of sitting them down and subjecting them to discourses on the programme and theology of the Kingdom of God, he wove his teaching into the fabric of their journeying together, addressing a point here and another here. Despite the spontaneous nature of these ‘lessons’, his teaching was coherent and consistent. Their apprenticeship under Jesus had already been intense, but it was about to deepen further as he prepared to set his course toward Jerusalem. Before taking this step, Jesus paused to ask them, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ It was a question that seemed easy enough. The disciples readily echoed the voices of the crowd: some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets. Indeed, Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing had all the hallmarks of Israel’s greatest prophets.

The teacher then asked a second, more searching question. He sought to move his followers beyond the interpretations of others, he wanted them to express their own understanding. It was no longer enough to lean on the answers of the crowd. Jesus implied that reciting creeds, quoting traditions and theologies would not suffice. ‘But who do *you* say that I am?’

Though the disciples are often depicted as slow to grasp the truth, in this moment Peter seems to see clearly: 'You are the Christ,' he boldly declares. And we, with the benefit of hindsight, breathe a sigh of relief - for Peter has indeed spoken the right words. Yet, he will quickly discover that understanding Jesus' identity is far more than naming a title. The act of naming does not contain the fullness of meaning.

For Peter, as for most of his Jewish contemporaries, the long-expected Messiah was envisioned as a royal figure - one who would topple the oppressors and usher in a kingdom of power and glory akin to King David's reign, establishing the Kingdom of God. But just as Peter believed he had solved the riddle, Jesus shattered his assumptions. He began to speak of a Messiahship not built on conquest but on suffering. It is, after all, the teacher's task to challenge their students' preconceived notions. Like Winston Churchill, who famously offered the British people only 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'¹ in the fight against Hitler's Germany, Jesus unfolded a narrative of redemption that would lead through rejection, abuse, abandonment, and death. What a chasm between the expected role of the Messiah and the reality of Jesus' mission! From the very beginning, Mark announced that his account was 'good news', *euangelion*. But how could this be good news? For the disciples, none of it made sense. They were bewildered and disoriented, unaware of the darkness yet to come, or that Peter himself would soon falter in the face of it, undone by fear and doubt. There is still so much more for them to learn - so many more answers for them to grow into.

As Jesus unveils more of his identity and destiny, he also defines what it means to share in his mission. Teaching, after all, is hollow without action. To know who Jesus is remains an abstract exercise unless it is lived out. Christ calls his followers not merely to understand, but to walk alongside him: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. Self-denial and bearing the cross - is this the cost of discipleship?

Jean Calvin, the 16th-century reformer, is known to have said that self-denial is 'the sum of the Christian life.'² However, in the 21st century, such language may seem outmoded. Our Western culture prizes self-esteem, self-empowerment, and self-sufficiency – anything but self-abasement. Yet, what if self-denial is not about devaluing ourselves, but rather, about losing the false self, surrendering

¹ Churchill, *Speech to the House of Commons*, 13 May 1940

² Calvin, *Institutes*, ch.7

the ego, giving up worldly values, and setting ourselves aside for the sake of the Kingdom's ones? What if it means giving ourselves for the sake of others, in a spirit of generosity, humility, and love? What if it means letting God's will direct our own?

And what of Jesus's exhortation to take up the cross? Does he call us to seek out suffering and martyrdom, to endure every hardship, from irritating neighbours to serious illness to discrimination to abuse to natural disasters, without complaint? Certainly not. Jesus' ministry was focused on alleviating suffering, not glorifying it. He healed the sick, restored relationships, liberated captives, and fed the hungry—acts that stand in radical contrast to any notion of suffering as virtuous in itself. The cross of Christ, instead, symbolises God's presence within human pain, and especially God's love for us in the midst of it. Thus, to bear the cross is not to embrace suffering for its own sake, but to accept the consequences of faithfully following Jesus, whatever they may be. It means placing God's purposes above our own comfort, and being willing to lose ourselves in service to others — giving our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that, through us, others might encounter the love of God revealed in Christ.

Christ's question, 'Who do you say that I am?' is for us to answer on this and every day. Yet, within it, lies another question: 'Who, then, will you say that you are?' This is the challenge embedded in his inquiry. It compels us to define our own identity, for faith, at some point, must become very personal and deeply invested. Our answer may emerge through a sudden, life-altering transformation, or it may unfold slowly, drawing us into the realisation that we must embrace this answer, shaping a new life and a new way of being. Are we prepared to align what we profess with how we live? The way we understand Jesus Christ will determine how far we are willing to follow him - the weight of the cross we are willing to bear in his name, the courage with which we will proclaim him to a world in need of his love and healing, and the humility with which we will serve as his hands to those in need.

The life of a disciple is a journey, walking with Christ in the way of the cross. We cannot know where this path will lead, but we are certain of our companion in Christ and the hope to which we are called. Take up your cross and follow him.

Amen.