

Sunday, September 12th. 2021. Trinity 15

Isaiah 50. 4-9a, Psalm 116.1-8, James 3. 1-12, Mark 8. 27-38

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If we are appointed to a senior position, we may have to form a new policy and make some changes, perhaps take the department or company in a new direction. This may result in being attacked or complained about in some way. In school, pupils, who are committed and want to learn, may be got at by those, who are jealous or who don't want to work; or we may be in a position where we feel that we have to speak out, for example about justice or unacceptable behaviour. There has been, once again recently, racist abuse at football matches and elsewhere. If we speak out, there may be some flak also.

Today's first reading contains what amounts to a servant song, the language of which resembles that of some of the psalms, for example, Psalm 129: 'Many a time have they fought against me from my youth; may Israel now say.'

Here the servant is summoned to give the message, but comes up against recalcitrance. As in the previous chapter, there is an overlap between the prophet's experience and that of his people, as the nation also is called to be a collective servant of God. He realises, however, that he will be protected by God and that he will be vindicated.

Today's Gospel comes at a pivotal point in Mark's Gospel. In the previous section, Mark shows how Jesus uses miracles to show who he is, the feeding of the 5,000 and the healing of a blind man. Now he asks the disciples, 'Who do you say I am?' This provokes Peter's declaration, 'You are the Messiah.' Which means the anointed one.

One of the characteristics of Mark's Gospel is his criticism of the disciples for their lack of understanding. They hadn't understood the deeper meaning of the feeding miracle; now it becomes clear that Peter hasn't understood the significance of Jesus as Messiah. So, when Jesus begins to explain what will happen to him, Peter begins to rebuke him. He thought that the Messiah would be someone, who would come in glory, perhaps a political or warrior king, who would deliver them from Roman occupation.

To leave no excuse for their misunderstanding, Mark shows that Jesus was no longer talking in parables, but speaking plainly. He anticipates the resurrection by saying that after 3 days, he will rise again. He will not

“be raised”, as in Matthew and Luke, but he “will rise” and will triumph over the enemy, death.

The Jesus explains to the crowd and to the disciples that, if they want to follow him, they will need to go in a different direction. Peter is told off and accused of not being on God’s side. Jesus tells him that the Messiah has to suffer. It is not an easy idea. We have to give up our lives, even go as far as to take up our cross, perhaps a thought from after the resurrection.

We have a choice. In the second reading, James describes the damage we can do by what we say. The tongue can direct us in different directions, like the small rudder on a big ship. He describes the contradiction of speaking blessings while cursing others, like a spring pouring out both fresh and brackish water. We have to choose.

When Jesus asks, ‘Who do you say I am?’ and we reply ‘You are the Messiah’, it changes us. Is what we do, every decision, acceptable to God? Does it match the way of Jesus?

When we speak, do we speak like Jesus words of forgiveness and acceptance, or does what we say divide or insult people? It involves a commitment, a turning point in our priorities.

If we choose the way of Jesus, we have the promise of the steadfast love of God, as in Psalm 116, where the psalmist, near to death, perhaps from illness, realises that God has heard his despair.

‘I love the Lord, for he has heard the voice of my supplication; because he inclined his ear to me on the day I called to him.’

He sees his deliverance as evidence of the gracious nature of God, who looks after the simple and acts with justice and compassion.

‘Gracious is the Lord and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord watches over the simple; I was brought very low and he saved me. Turn again to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has been gracious to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears and my feet from falling.’

Jesus teaches that he will suffer and die, but on the third day he will rise and be with us for ever. That life, eternal life, is offered to us, if we are prepared to choose that way. Jesus was asking his disciples for their commitment, while warning them that it wouldn’t always be easy. Can we make that commitment? Can we make the psalmist’s words our own? ‘I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.’

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

