



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 15th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 19 Year B

James 3.1-12

Mark 8. 27-38

The passage set for today must be one of the most famous in the gospels. It is contained in the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Luke and Mark. I went to a Methodist Sunday school and I can still remember the teacher telling us this story and imagining Peter making this declaration.

The passage does not follow on from last week. After Jesus has healed the daughter of the Syrophenician woman there is the story of the feeding of the four thousand. Later the Pharisees came and began to argue with Jesus, asking him for a sign from heaven, of course Jesus does not do things to order. He was well aware of their motives, as it says their demand was simply to 'test him.' Last week I said that the storm clouds of opposition and danger are gathering around Jesus. He rebukes the Pharisees for continually wanting 'signs' (as if they haven't had enough!) but as Jesus knows they are continually trying to trap him, they have no intention of accepting his words. Immediately Jesus gets into a boat with his disciples,

¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.' Mark 8

We know that both the religious powers and the ruling powers have their own agenda. The Pharisees want control of the people, and so long as God's Messiah does it their way then fine. Herod wants his line legitimised as the true rulers of Israel, which they aren't and never can be. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of David's line. He is the true King therefore a threat. Think back to how Herod the Great tried to have him killed as a child. Jesus will never be accepted by the powers that be, his kingdom, the kingdom of God, is the antithesis of theirs which are based on worldly values of selfishness, power and oppression. Jesus warns his disciples against the rulers and their world view. Yet still they do not seem to understand Jesus and their view seems still to be literal.

‘Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?’

What happens just prior to our reading is that Jesus encounters a blind man at Bethsaida. People ask Jesus to heal him. It is significant that Jesus takes him out of the village to do so. At first the man sees only shadows, he sees dimly, then it all becomes crystal clear and his sight is restored. Once more Jesus won't let him tell of his restoration.

This gaining of sight is reflected in our passage today. A while ago Jesus said, ‘do you still not understand’ even after all they have seen and heard, even after all the teaching. Now there is a change and it is as if scales have fallen from the disciples’ eyes, as if they were blind but now they see.

Jesus has taken the disciples away from Bethsaida towards Caesarea Philippi.

I didn't know very much about Caesarea Philippi so I looked it up. Caesarea Philippi stood some twenty five miles to the north east of the Sea of Galilee at the base of Mount Hermon. It was the centre of the worship of different god's, Roman, Syrian and Greek. The god Pan gave the town its former name Panias. There were temples to gods all around. Not only that but it was here that Herod the Great had built a huge temple to Caesar as a god. It was his son Philip who added to this temple and changed the name to Caesarea adding his own name Philippi. I mention all of this because it shows how this area was soaked in different religions. It was important in Judaism too because by this temple was a cave which was the source waters of the River Jordan.

It is very significant therefore that it is in this place, a melting pot of so many religions that Jesus chose to ask that key question of his disciples. ‘Who do people say that I am?’ Jesus is the true God, one with his Father.

The answers show how other people see Jesus; they see him as a prophet, like John the Baptist or Elijah, men of God who fearlessly bring the message of God to the people. People thought Jesus was one of these brought back to life. The tradition was that Elijah would appear before the coming of the Messiah. John foretold the coming of the Messiah and was fearless in doing so. Some thought Jesus was a great prophet in his own right. Jesus's answer is significant, but what about you, how do you see me?

When Peter answers he speaks for all the disciples.

‘You are the Messiah.’

In Matthew's gospel (chapter 16), which is later than Mark's, Jesus continues with the words

¹⁷‘And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.’

This section is pivotal in that it seems to emphasise Peter's position as leader of the disciples and the foundation stone of the Christian church, yet Mark says nothing of this.

Mark continues

³⁰ 'And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.'

This is, if you like, a turning point. From now on Jesus will turn his face towards Jerusalem and the dangers that will face him there. This admission of Peter's does not mean that the disciples understood Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, though of course Mark does. If we look at Matthew however Jesus' words indicate that he is exactly that. Peter and the disciples recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the true king in David's line. We think of Jesus' words from John's gospel (chapter 6) when some followers walk away because his teaching challenges them, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Once again we have a pivotal declaration; once more it is Peter who speaks. John's gospel is of course much later than Mark's but it is worth making the comparison.

It is no wonder Jesus does not want the disciples to say anything. Here he is at a Roman city which contains a temple dedicated to Emperor Worship. The Jews would have seen the first task of the Messiah to free them from the occupying power, probably by force. Anyone declared as Messiah or who proclaimed himself as Messiah, would be a threat to Romans who would seek to destroy any threat to their power.

The Messiah was the true King of Israel of David's line; you have King Herod in Jerusalem who is anything but. He has just murdered John the Baptist and would see Jesus as a threat to his rule as king. He would wish to destroy him.

The Jewish religious leaders are out to get Jesus because the Messiah task was to cleanse the Temple. Imagine the reaction of the priests to that! The toppling of their power is what all three would be terrified of therefore anyone who challenged them must be destroyed. These are dangerous times for Jesus yet he must have time to complete his mission. It is not yet the time for the final battle with evil.

These are things that the Jews would have expected of the Messiah yet Jesus does not conform to their expectations. He has spoken out against the religious leaders because their behaviour is not of God's way, because they are trying to control the people and exploit them. Jesus is bringing in God's kingdom and it is not in the images of those in authority. His is a very different way, the way of justice, peace and freedom for the poor and the oppressed. Jesus is establishing God's Kingdom values. Jesus is the herald of God's new creation. He is not about to lead an armed rebellion either. People who want a Messiah in their image are angry that Jesus doesn't conform to their expectations. The result of all this opposition is inevitable.

What Jesus says next must have shocked the disciples to the core.

³¹ 'Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.'

How on earth can that be? The Messiah as they understood it, would vanquish all his enemies and establish God's rule, he certainly wouldn't be killed by them. Surely that would defeat all they believed in. What on earth does Jesus mean? Naturally it is Peter who speaks for them all once more.

‘And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Peter is human and he is big hearted. He loves Jesus and so when Jesus makes this shocking announcement Peter reacts as any normal human would. ‘No way, this must never happen to you.’ We think of Peter later promising Jesus he would never leave him, he would fight to the end only to let him down when it came to it. With Peter often the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. We can all empathise with that. Peter is reacting as any Jew would too, if Jesus is the Messiah then he will be the conqueror, the one who will lead the people to victory over their oppressors and bring in God’s rule. It’s not part of the plan that the all-conquering Messiah should be killed!

Peter reacts out of natural feelings. Jesus sums it up when he says, ‘you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ Peter cannot see that if Jesus is the Messiah, then there are consequences. Jesus is the Son of God, the saviour of humanity and salvation will be won on Calvary and at the resurrection, not with arms. There is no other way for love to triumph over evil. If we think of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, where Satan offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world, Jesus makes it quite clear that he will follow only God’s way and that is not the human way.

No, anyone who stands in the way of divine will is acting as an agent of evil, even Peter. Jesus is walking the path he was destined to walk, in God’s time.

Jesus once more calls the crowds to him; he has been speaking to the disciples in private. He makes it quite clear that if anyone is going to follow him then there will be consequences.

³⁴ ‘He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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.’

To follow Jesus means wholehearted commitment. Half and half measures won’t do. To follow the way of Jesus can mean persecution and death, as it has for so many Christians throughout the centuries to the present day. The way of the cross was very real; Mark of course would be writing his gospel for Christians who were facing persecution. To the Romans only Caesar was Lord, to Christians only Jesus was Lord and they would pay with their lives for that. There is no other way; Christianity is not a cosy religion to be bent to what a person wants, it is the way of Jesus. Think once again of the rich young ruler who left Jesus rather than give up his riches. Here Jesus isn’t just talking about riches but lives. Yes a person may lose their life but they will win eternal life with him.

Jesus’ words are a challenge, they were then and they are today. Jesus is very clear about what was in store for him and indeed any who chose to follow him.

³⁵ ‘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.’

There is no other way for Jesus, by facing down the powers of evil, by dying for us on Calvary, evil will be defeated and he will win salvation for all who believe by love’s triumph over evil.

³⁸ ‘Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

This is more specific. Jesus is talking here as 'The son of Man' he speaks of 'his Father' and 'angels.' We think once more of the words to Peter, 'For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Jesus' obeys the way of God his Father. He will be 'obedient unto death even death on a cross' this must be, but Easter day will follow Good Friday and Jesus will win eternal life for all who follow him.

Last week we were looking at James' discussion of faith and works. Well this surely is what Jesus means when he says,

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

That is a call to action if ever I heard one, 'believe in me then act on it as I have taught you.' That is really what James is reiterating in his epistle. Professor Tom Wright puts it like this, 'Translating belief into action even when it seems impossible or downright dangerous. That is the faith that matters, that is the faith that justifies. This is the heart of the message of James, to make sure that faith is the real thing.'

James in his epistle is explaining to the new members of the Christian church what sort of behaviour is expected of them; here he turns his attention to speech. I used to love 'Larkrise to Candleford' I hadn't watched it in years but since I have had more time mum and I have been digging out the old DVDs like 'Downton' and 'Larkrise' and luxuriating in them! It just so happens that the episode of 'Larkrise' I watched last night was about a woman who lived to gossip and the terrible damage that a malicious tongue can do to other people's lives.

James begins with a specific warning,

³ 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters,'

I had to smile at that because that was my profession for twenty six years. I loved my job and the subject I taught but I wouldn't be human if I said I had never thought those words of James! Seriously though, I know exactly what James means, anyone who teaches sets themselves apart or is set apart as one who has truths to impart. People look to them for an example, to say nothing of the power they have over other people's lives. Think back to when you were at school, to teachers you remember, it will probably be those who were kind and had a real influence on you and your future, in some cases your whole career and life, who stand out. I remember taking a group of sixth-formers to a court to watch a trial, for general studies. The prosecution lawyer kept looking at me and in a break she came over. 'I got my love of the law in a mock trial we did in your English Literature class and look at me now, thank you.'

Then other teachers will bring back darker memories of fear, even maybe of bullying. Of course a Christian minister as James explains has a huge responsibility. They must teach the word of God and live it out in their lives. It isn't just what you say or teach, in both cases it is what you do that matters, back to James' message of faith and works. What he is saying here is, think very carefully before you offer to teach others or accept authority over them in Jesus' name. Power is what he is

talking about too. Power can be used for great good or evil. Anyone who is in authority has power. The challenge is to use it for good in Jesus' way, lives are held in other people's hands

There is nothing wrong with the tongue, the power of speech is a great gift of God, it is what you say that matters, especially if you are the one who is teaching or who has power, but it is true of everyone. We think of Jesus' words, 'It is not what goes into the body but what comes out that defiles' or at least has the power to.

'for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.'

Those who are put in authority are judged more strictly than others because they are in positions of trust, if they abuse that trust then they should be judged. We will all be judged by God of course. We all make mistakes but it's our job to fight against error not to commit it purposely. James' writing is in parts beautiful in its imagery.

³'If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.'

A bit is a tiny thing but we use it to control a great and powerful horse, a rudder is small but it controls a vast ship. Well the tongue is tiny but we can use it to do great good or great wrong.

'How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire.'

James goes on to describe the great damage and hurt the tongue can cause.

'The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell... ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.'

Well it can be an instrument of cruelty and deadly evil but it only speaks what the brain conceives, Can anyone control the tongue – of course we can, if we want to. It is in our speech we stand out against evil and wrong.

You can't have it both ways and you shouldn't, people bless one minute and curse the next. It is not only hypocrisy in speech James condemns; he, like Jesus, condemns hypocrisy full stop. He is really echoing Jesus' comments about the Pharisees who are like 'whited sepulchres' clean on the outside foul inside.

We all must turn our back on what is wrong, hurtful to others or unkind. The pen might be mightier than the sword but the tongue is more powerful, still it has the power to inflict great hurt, hurt that can damage a person and stay with them for a lifetime. Conversely it can be the instrument of the greatest kindness. Watch out, says James, especially you who have power over others particularly in the church and choose kindness and Jesus' way. Live out what you teach, is his message for all of us.

During the last eighteen months mum and I have received great kindness from some people. People who we would have called acquaintances before are now real friends because of their kindness. I have heard stories of others too who have done wonderful things to help others during this

pandemic. Sometimes the action may be a huge one, one of self-sacrifice, sometimes it may be small but it means everything to the person who receives it. Just a kind word can change someone's day for the better.

'Love one another with a pure heart fervently; see that ye love one another.' Samuel Wesley

~~~~~