

Sermon

'But who do you say that I am?'

Year B, Lent 3



In this morning's Gospel, Jesus makes it very clear to Peter that the place of a disciple is behind him on the road towards Jerusalem and the Cross. Although the path we are called to walk is different in time and place its essence is the same. Jesus asks his followers to give up pretensions to greatness and power, to embrace the Cross and to love and serve him and one another. Despite the world's scepticism the result of such a life is peace, joy and fulfilment.

In the verses immediately before those from which we have read this morning, Jesus asks his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am.' Peter answers him 'You are the Messiah'. Jesus response is not what the disciples were expecting.

He warns them not to tell anyone about him. 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.

Throughout the Gospel tradition, Jesus may be heard to refuse the title of 'Messiah', as an accurate description of his person and ministry, because of the meaning that was attached to this title, during his day.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish messianic expectation was centred upon a political king. It was understood, by those around Jesus, in a political sense. Jesus knew what was in their minds. They were looking for a human political revolution. The overthrow of the Roman empire. The restoration of the political kingdom of Israel. To the Jewish people of Jesus day, Jesus' teaching that the Messiah will be rejected by his own people, suffer, and die, simply made no sense.

Jesus refusal of the messianic expectation of the Jewish people may be seen in his choice of title for himself. From the prophet Daniel, the title Son of Man was one that was no longer in use in Jesus' day. Unlike the title Messiah, the Son of Man was free from the manipulation of the crowds. And of the non-human actor behind the manipulation. Whose influence is revealed, in Jesus telling rebuke of Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' An echo of the temptation in the wilderness. When the enemy of our human nature took Jesus to the mountain top, and offered him all the kingdoms of the world, if only he would bow down and worship him.

And it was his failure to fulfil the messianic expectations, the political ambitions, of the ancient Jewish leaders, which led to his rejection by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, his suffering, and his dying.

A rejection, a suffering and a dying, not only for the Jewish leaders, but for the world, which had fallen into the original temptation, of wanting to be God. Of wanting for itself the wisdom, the power, the authority of God. A temptation which led them, to laying bloodied hands, on Jesus, the one, truly innocent and obedient man.

Jesus is the Messiah of God. When God raised him from the dead, God himself confirmed it. But he is the Messiah of God, not in the political sense, but the spiritual sense. He is the Messiah of God, whose person and ministry cannot be

understood in a political sense, but in a spiritual sense. His person and ministry, is the spiritual liberation of the human race.

When in climax to his person and work, he gave himself up, in answer to his own prayer to the Father, on behalf of the human race: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

'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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.'