

**Sermon**  
**Great St Mary's, Cambridge**  
**15th September 2024**  
**Trinity XVI / Holy Cross Day**

**Isaiah 50. 4 - 9a**

The Lord God has given me  
a trained tongue,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he wakens,  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.  
The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious;  
I did not turn backward.  
I gave my back to those who struck me  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.  
The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;  
he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand in court together.  
Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.  
It is the Lord God who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?

**James 3. 1 - 12**

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the

tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

### **Mark 8.27 - 38**

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.”

He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, 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.”

### **SERMON**



Who do people say that I am?

Jesus asks those who follow him this question: Who do the people say I am?

Let's pause for a moment and re-focus that question on ourselves:

Who would people say you are?

How would you define yourself to others?

How would you want people to perceive you?

If I were to be asked those questions what would I say? I might respond with any of these: human, husband, brother, son, friend, teacher, priest, Christian?

Jesus and his disciples are on a journey. They are heading North, from Bethsaida towards the Golan Heights, today that Israeli-occupied portion of Syria. In Jesus's day it included

the Hellenistic city of Caesarea Philippi right at the foot of Mt Hermon, and at one of the major sources of the River Jordan. Jesus and his disciples were heading into the proverbial Lion's Den. This city's name represented all of the aspects of Jewish history, especially the occupation of Israel by Rome, the Herodian vassals, that would lead to rebellion and insurrection. It is on the way to this place that Jesus poses his question to his disciples and his followers: Who do people say I am?

The answers came: John the Baptist - Elijah. Jesus reframes the question for his disciples: **“But who do you say that I am?”**. In moment of realisation, Peter answers: **“You are the Messiah.”** You are the Christ. **And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.** This small but growing band of followers of a man they now perceive to be the Messiah, the Christ - the Jewish leader whom they hope will end the oppressors' rule; lead Jews into a free, independent existence under the God of Israel. There is just a hint of the progress, the procession into the very symbol of oppression, that Joel Marcus writes ‘invokes the Isain picture of a divine victory march culminating in the redemption of Zion’<sup>1</sup>.

Our Gospel reading does truly explore who Jesus is - and affirms at least three roles for him as it does: Jesus is Messiah. Jesus is a teacher. Jesus is a prophet. Marcus reminds us that Mark's Gospel from its very beginning speaks of whom Jesus is:

In 1.27 ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority!’

In 4. 41 ‘Who then is this? - for even the wind and the sea obey him!’

In 6.2. ‘Where does this man get these things from?’<sup>2</sup>

Jesus begins teaching them about what must happen next. He tells them, in a prophetic sense what will happen: **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. He said all this quite openly.** This is the very first of Jesus' prophetic statements, in Mark's Gospel, about his impending passion, his suffering and his death and resurrection. Peter finds this difficult - not least because he has just found for himself this most inspiring of men and Jesus is now telling them he has to die. Imagine hearing that for the first time. This inspirational teacher, this Rabbi, this man you have recently recognised as the Messiah, is now going to leave you. Peter rebukes Jesus. Jesus' response is brutal. Get behind me Satan. Get back to following and learning. And then he invokes the sense that there is not much he can do about this process,

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus, Joel; *Mark 8 - 16* Yale University Press, (2009), p. 610

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.611

because it is all part of the **divine will** - it is what God, His Father, has ordained. It is what Jesus has come to do for Peter, for his disciples, for us. He is not quite the Messiah they anticipated in the Jewish tradition. A tradition which required a triumphant Messiah. A Messiah who forms an alliance with the priestly classes to bring about change. Jesus shatters that perception too. His messianic journey is, as he describes, one of suffering, suffering at the hands of those who should know Jesus for whom he is. His journey will, must culminate in the Cross, the ultimate humiliation of Jesus' world. Jesus will do this for the salvation of all of Creation, a reconciliation.

It seems significant to me too, that on this day, following yesterday's feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, that today's Gospel speaks to what it means to be a follower of Christ. He teaches his followers and his disciples:

**“If any wish to come after me, 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?”**

Jesus rebukes Peter for what is a perfectly human response. We in Cambridge live in a very transient world. People come into our lives, remain there for three years and then depart. We enjoy their company while they are with us, but we may never see them again. Jesus was amongst his disciples for three years - he taught, he healed, he explained what his mission was. He dies on the Cross for us, but then is raised from the dead, and in his death we are freed from our sins and through his resurrection we are afforded new life. In and through Him we are reconciled to God. We have a friend in Jesus, whom we see not, but who walks alongside us in our life's journey.

And so who must we be? We must be alive to the love of God. To the Holy Spirit. Deep in faith. Boundless in our energy for growing the kingdom of God. Bountiful in sharing the joys of being a Christian.

Who do you say to others you are? A Christian. A disciple of Christ, our redeemer and friend. A beacon of light to those who have yet to find their lives in Christ Jesus.

Amen.