Sunday 13th September, 2015

Welcome to Worship
Racial Justice Sunday

10.30am Morning Worship led by
Rev Dr Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman
Including the Sacrament of Holy Communion
6.00pm Town Close with Helen Weighell

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Worship Resource:
Let us come before the Lord now, in stillness.
The Lord has words for the weary,
encouragement for those who struggle
and comfort for our souls.
Let us gather as disciples, awaiting the Lord, our leader.
To whom do we turn? We turn to the Lord.
To whom do we listen? We listen to the Lord!
Come then, let us worship the Lord!
Amen.

Lectionary Readings:
Proverbs 1 v20-33 Warning Against Rejecting Wisdom
“The complacency of fools will destroy them ... Whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.”
James 3 v1-12 Taming the Tongue
“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness.”
Mark 8 v27-38 Peter’s Confession of Christ/Jesus Predicts His Death
“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it.”

Who Do You Think You Are?

In this week’s reading from Mark 8 we hear how Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus predicts his Passion & Peter rebukes him. But we learn what it takes to be a true disciple - that followers of Jesus must deny themselves and take up the cross. But let’s go back to the Old Testament first - Isaiah 50 v4-9a. This is one of the ‘servant songs’ of the Book of Isaiah, so called because they depict a servant whose existence is characterised by suffering that then leads to redemption and deliverance for others. There has been much speculation as to who Isaiah imagined this servant to be. Was it himself, or the nation of Judah, or just a creative way of highlighting the harsh realities of life? Whoever was originally intended, it clearly became a central way of understanding Jesus’ life, death and resurrection: he was the servant of God, whose suffering redeemed the lives of others.
Viewed more broadly, the pattern of suffering leading to redemption has an almost archetypal significance, as can be seen in some heroes of more recent times: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi.

Back to the Gospel reading from Mark 8 v27-38:

We have already used the term ‘pantomime’ in relation to Mark’s style, and this passage highlights it well. It stands almost exactly at the centre of his Gospel, and is certainly a crucial passage in the development of the narrative. Yet it happens in a remote corner of the country where Jesus was largely unknown, and for once the instruction to keep it all secret can be carried through successfully – but only because nobody in that region had the slightest interest in knowing who Jesus might actually be!

The passage falls into two sections. In the first, Jesus asks about perceptions of his own identity. Asking questions is one of Jesus’ characteristic forms of conversation, and we have much to learn from that. He doesn’t give many answers – in fact, when he does, it is usually in the form of a story that is intentionally designed to raise more questions. There is something significant here about how to have a missional conversation. Listening is often more important than speaking. Peter, as ever, is the one who gives what you might think was the ‘right’ answer – which turns out to be sort of right, but misses the real point of it. And so in the second part of the passage Jesus explains to them what it might mean to be ‘Messiah’. Except that he doesn’t! He talks about ‘the Son of Man’ instead.

Oceans of ink have been spilled by scholars in trying to explain the precise meaning of this term. But think of it here as a bit like Jesus telling yet another story. It certainly works in the same way, as it is left to the imagination of his hearers to make the connections – or not. They get the message, and they don’t like it. Actually, losing your life in order to save it is a well-worn pathway, and this becomes the theme of the final section here (v34-38) as Jesus applies it not just to himself but to his disciples. Today, martyrdom is a real possibility again for Christians in certain countries around the world. So a question about who Jesus is ends up being one about who we think we are in relation to him.

The most obvious link here is between the servant song of Isaiah 50 and what Jesus says about his own role as ‘Messiah’. Whereas popular expectations were of a victorious king who would vanquish all his enemies (a view shared by the disciples), Jesus saw the way forward as being through humble service and, ultimately, self-sacrificial love. The differences between the two passages are just as significant as their similarities, though. In Isaiah, the identity of the servant is never revealed, whereas Jesus not only appears to identify himself with this image (albeit through the even more enigmatic figure of the Son of Man) but says quite clearly that his followers can expect to be suffering servants too if they take their discipleship seriously.

**A sending out prayer**

Go, carry your cross into the world.
But remember it is not yours, but the cross of Christ.
Therefore we say:
We shall not be ashamed, but gladly walk in the way of our Lord!
Amen.