

Sermon – Andrea Ward 12th September 2021

James 3:1-12 / Mark 8:27-38

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” Phew! What a sermon you could preach on that for your leaving message!! And “Not many of you should presume to be teachers...because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” - gulp, what a timely reminder that is; maybe I’ll leave it there and go and sit down.

The lectionary has dished up two very challenging and powerful readings for my last sermon! And as I’ve reflected on them, it’s struck me how apt they are for this morning at this moment of change and transition for us all, as Pete and I say farewell. For as we move, yes, our and your physical journeys will be going in a different direction, but our *spiritual* journey continues in the same direction. And in Mark 8 particularly, we find what is at the heart of our shared Christian faith and journey; a simple yet profound message and call that remains the same for us all, whatever else may change along the way.

And so it’s that message that I want to draw us back to this morning, as we prepare to go *forward* into this time of change for us all.

Mark 8

“You are the Christ”

Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ is an absolutely seminal moment in the gospel of Mark.

And I don’t know whether you’ve ever noticed, but it comes right bang in the middle of Mark’s gospel. Chapter 8 of 16 chapters. And at the very heart of his gospel account Mark presents us with the essence of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And it involves what we proclaim with our lips and how we fulfil that proclamation in how we live our lives.

The disciples had been following literally in Jesus’s footsteps and in their extraordinary journey with him, they had seen him heal the sick, perform signs and wonders, walk on water, raise the dead. He had taught with an authority that left people amazed; he challenged the institutional leaders with a wisdom that they had no answer to. More and more people were gathering around this extraordinary teacher and prophet, whose star was in its ascendancy.

And then one day, quite out of the blue, as he was walking with his disciples, Jesus throws out the big question:

“Who do people say I am?”

Well, that’s an easy question to answer, isn’t it – giving other people’s opinions, saying what other people think. John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, a good man, an interesting teacher....

“But who do *you* say I am?”

Maybe it was easy for Peter, among friends, to come straight out with his reply (Peter was, after all, very good at blurting out his opinion). But I wonder, whether before the words tripped off his tongue, “You are the Christ”, if others were looking nervously around at each other, checking out, wondering if they dared say what they truly thought. They may not have all shared the same opinion at this stage - we don’t know!

So, I reckon that it took some guts to make that huge confession “You are the Christ / You are the Anointed One”. That’s right, the One who’d been promised to Israel for centuries, the one to whom all scriptures had been pointing. What if he’d been wrong? Imagine the shock, the cries of blasphemy, certainly ridicule and laughter. At this point, Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone about him; the time wasn’t yet right, but with the coming of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles would stand up and confess Jesus as the Christ,

the Messiah, with a boldness and fearlessness that would land them in prison but would also lead thousands to turn to Christ.

At the very heart of *our* Christian calling today is that same confession of Jesus as Christ; Jesus as the Son of God, the anointed one. As God's people we are called to stand up and own and declare our faith in Jesus Christ. And making that confession continues to be as challenging for us today as it was for the disciples; it's so easy for others to give all sorts of opinions about who Jesus is, but nailing *our* colours to the mast and saying "I believe Jesus is Lord, is the Christ, is the Son of God" can sometimes make us feel very vulnerable. But it is essential that we own our faith in Jesus Christ - or we risk him being ashamed of us "when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (verse 38).

When we first started gathering to worship again in March, when we still weren't permitted to sing inside the church, we decided that after the service we would go outside and sing. I remember how joyful it felt to be able to praise God together again with just this one song. And as we've continued this practice, there's been something so powerful about singing our praises to the Lord for everyone outside to hear - to people walking by, people in their cars. It's been such an encouragement, the body of Christ going out and joyfully declaring our faith in Jesus Christ. I'd encourage you to continue doing that (weather permitting!) and to ask the Lord how you might build on that witness that you're making with your lips.

But as we all go forward into this new season, for yourselves and for Pete and I, may God strengthen us to be like Peter and to boldly confess with our lips that Jesus is the Christ.

So, first of all, confession of Jesus as Christ our Lord is at the heart of our Christian faith.

But of course, how we *live out* that confession is equally important. How we follow in the example given to us by the Lord.

So, we have this glorious moment, the "up" of Peter's confession of Christ, and then Jesus tells them about the even more glorious future which is going to unfold for the Christ: of growing power and influence, culminating in his being crowned as King of Israel and a long, victorious reign. That's what Peter and his friends must have been expecting to hear. But no,

"He then began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again".

It's hard for us to get our heads round the horror and confusion that Jesus's words must have caused the disciples - Peter's reaction of rebuking Jesus, spoke for everyone else, I'm sure.

Suffering, defeat, death (the rising again bit would have just gone over their heads) - in what way could this possibly be good or God's way? And would you want to follow a leader whose mission sounded like it was going to end in complete disaster, pain and humiliation - more than that, a leader who apparently *wanted* it to be so? What other leader has ever pursued a path like this? It's absolutely upside down to all human logic. But the path that Jesus had to tread was one of surrender of self, of suffering and death on the cross. There was no other way for Jesus to achieve his mission to lift us up out of our desperate state.

Jesus made that choice to surrender himself to the wood and the nails of the cross. And it was only in doing so that he was able to fulfil his true vocation: to become the Saviour of the world. Through his death came his triumph, the resurrection, becoming a king infinitely more victorious than the one that the disciples could ever have imagined: King of all Creation.

And just as he wanted his disciples to understand that the things that would happen to him were not by chance but part of God's plan, so Jesus needed them also to understand that those who would confess him as Christ and Lord, must follow in his pattern.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Our Christian calling is to learn to lift that cross of Jesus and the way of surrender in our own life. It’s so tempting to think the path of surrender will make us miserable, but it’s the great paradox of the gospel that it leads to the very fullness of life that we are all looking for and discovering our true vocation in this life and our true reward in the next.

As the powerful words of The Passion translation:

“And you must be willing to share my cross and experience it as your own, as you continually surrender to my ways. ³⁵ For if you let your life go for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, you will continually experience true life.”

So, as we go forward in our journey with Christ, the challenge for us all is what might this look like in our lives - individually and as God’s people? And I wonder what that true life, might be that he wants us to experience as we do so?

Confessing with our lips that Jesus is the Christ.

Following in the pattern Jesus has shown us, the path of surrender.

And finally, living out our calling in how we love one another in the Body of Christ.

So, where am I going to find this in our bible passages? Let’s turn to James 3 and this teaching about the taming the tongue. And the key verses I want to draw on are verses 9-12:

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both freshwater and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

The teaching in the letter of James has to be some of the most direct and pointed about the importance of living a life that is in harmony with the faith we profess. We’ve looked at how at the core of our Christian life is our confession with our lips of Jesus Christ as our Lord. Well, here, in these few verses, James makes it really clear: We cannot praise the Lord with our lips and then in the next breath curse people whom God has made in his very own image.

The apostle John, in his first letter, says an almost identical thing:

If anyone says, “I love God”, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

Both James and John were deeply concerned about this discrepancy that they’d observed or heard about among God’s people. For James, the idea that a Christian could praise Christ with their lips and then use those same lips to curse or speak badly about their brother or sister in Christ was such an anathema that it was like going to an apple tree and finding strawberries on it instead.

And yet, we all know, how easy it is to say something we shouldn’t, words that pull down rather than build up our brothers and sisters in Christ. And which bring disharmony and unrest rather than unity and peace in the body of Christ.

At times, this can be so challenging I know. But when we look at one another, we’re looking at someone who has been made by God in his image (and redeemed by him on that Cross); we’re looking at a reflection

of God, a piece of his beautiful Creation. Let's remember to see God in each other, even when we're finding that difficult. For our love for Christ and for one another, is in God's eyes, one and the same thing. There is no difference in his eyes.

Confessing with our lips that Jesus is the Christ.

Following in the pattern Jesus has shown us, the path of surrender.

And living out our calling in how we love one another in the Body of Christ.

It's not the definitive list, of course, but in our bible readings this morning we're presented with something of the absolute essence of what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ. What unites us with our fellow Christians, where ever they may be and whatever direction our physical journeys may be going in - our spiritual journey in Jesus Christ.