

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

Online Service for 12th September 2021

Prepared by Alison McLeod

Theme: “Who do you say I am?”



Call to worship:

Almighty God, we come before you this day to worship You and to ask Your guidance upon our lives.

We come to be still, we come to read Your word and we come to offer ourselves to You.

Prepare our hearts for worship and lift our spirits as we worship and glorify You, so that we may feel renewed and refreshed. **Amen**

Hymn: **To God be the Glory Fanny Crosby & William Doane **StF 94****

1. To God be the glory, great things he hath done:
so loved he the world that he gave us his son,
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

**Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
and give him the glory, great things he hath done.**

2. Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God.
The vilest offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. **Praise the Lord...**

3. Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son,
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see. **Praise the Lord...**

Prayers of praise and confession:

Lord, you walked with Your disciples from village to village. And on the way You talked to them about many things. Some things were not easy to hear or to understand.

We meet You here today, Lord, to hear these things too. You don't call us to sit doing nothing. You want us to be on the move: taking risks to change our world and save our lives. Help us, then, to draw close to You, to be ready to listen. Then to act.

We offer today our heartfelt love and praise because your Son, Jesus Christ, was willing to risk everything for the whole world. Even for us. We come to praise and worship You, earnestly seeking Your will for us – longing to know and recognise Your presence in our hearts - knowing Father God that You have asked us to bear fruit in our lives and to share our faith with others.

Yet so many times we have failed You in doing this. We have let You down and let ourselves down. Our thoughts and words have failed You; we have missed opportunities to speak up for our belief in You, choosing to remain silent instead of witnessing for You. Our discipleship has been weak and often non-existent. We are ashamed of our weaknesses, faults, greed, selfishness, envy, and pride. Our faith has been shallow, and we have failed You in so many ways.

In Your forgiving mercy and grace cleanse our hearts and minds that we may better serve You and so that we can feel strengthened to follow You more faithfully each day.

Amen

Hymn: Lord Christ we praise Your sacrifice Alan Gaunt **StF 359** Tune: Abingdon

1. Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice,
your life in love so freely given.
For those who took your life away
you prayed: that they might be forgiven;
and there, in helplessness arrayed,
God's power was perfectly displayed.

2. Once helpless in your mother's arms,
dependent on her mercy then;
at last, by choice, in other hands,
you were as helpless once again;
and, at their mercy, crucified,
you claimed your victory and died.

3. Though helpless and rejected then,
you're now as risen Lord acclaimed;
forever by your sacrifice
is God's eternal love proclaimed:
the love which, dying, brings to birth
new life and hope for all on earth.

4. So, living Lord, prepare us now
your willing helplessness to share;
to give ourselves in sacrifice
to overcome the world's despair;
in love to give our lives away
and claim your victory today.

Reading: Mark 8 27-38

New International Version

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?' ²⁸ They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

²⁹ 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus predicts his death

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

The way of the cross

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: '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. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

Message

This chapter of the Gospel provides a pivot in the ministry of Jesus - a bridge, a turning point in the story as recorded by Mark. We know from the lectionary readings up to this point that Jesus has been very active, journeying from village to village, teaching and healing people, performing miracles - and generously offered everything, including Himself and His time, to all He has met. Jesus and the disciples, know that to include non-Jewish people will draw the attention of the religious leaders. At first however, the disciples do not seem to have much insight of what they have become involved in.

Caesarea Philippi was quite a way from Galilee. There is a natural spring there (see my photo above) which is the largest source of the Jordan River. It is commonly known as Baniyas today and is said to be the birthplace of Pan the Greek god of nature. Here Jesus and His disciples escape the crowd briefly and grab the chance to talk. There are lots of views and opinions of Jesus circulating among the people of the region. Jesus wants to know what is being said of Him.

His first question is 'Who do **people** say I am?' to which the disciples give a variety of answers with a common thread – Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets – because Jesus is clearly a man of God with a powerful and prophetic message and an ability to transform lives.

But then He challenges the disciples directly asking: "**Who do you say I am?**"

And it was in this beautiful landscape, with the history of ancient religions surrounding them, that Peter saw in Jesus' true identity: the Son of God. Like a shot, Peter commits himself saying 'You are the Messiah'.

William Barclay calls this the peak moment of Mark's gospel because with Peter's courageous declaration, Jesus knew that all He had done and taught over His ministry had come to fruition. He had not failed in His task. They knew who He truly was.

But no sooner had the truth been spoken Jesus immediately tells him not to tell anyone about Him! Why?

Basically, it was because in the Hebrew Bible a Messiah, or mashiach, is a king or high priest, traditionally anointed with holy oil which held connotations of a warrior king.

It brought to mind times of violence and destruction and vengeance for all that had befallen the nation, not what Jesus has in mind at all. He now had to re-educate them, telling them what Messiahship really meant.

As the Gospel says: ³¹ **He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.**

Jesus doesn't talk of the glory which some might associate with the Messiah but of a shameful death. A suffering dying Saviour which had to come before glory.

You can imagine then that the disciples would be confused by this. As they saw it, He could now reveal himself to all in acts of glory and power as the true King of Israel, the heir to the throne of David; someone to sort out the mess Israel was in. They certainly weren't expecting suffering, rejection and death! What was going on?

So Peter takes him to one side for a quiet word! He sees Jesus' statement as a contradiction of everything he had traditionally been brought up to believe a Messiah was. And dying wasn't part of the picture as far as he was concerned! I think that Peter showed a natural human reaction and response: "Are you really sure you've got this right Lord?"

But after making sure that all the disciples are in earshot, Jesus rebukes Peter in front of them: **'Get behind me, Satan!'**

It seems very harsh. But Jesus chooses his words carefully. Biblically, Satan is an adversary, coercive, disruptive in a way which drives us away from God. Satan had tempted Jesus to be the 'wrong type' of Messiah in those times just after His baptism when they battled in the desert – If Jesus was a selfish, materialistic sort of Messiah who valued self-preservation why would He not:

- Create bread out of stones to relieve His own hunger;
- Leap from a pinnacle and rely on angels to break His fall or
- Kneel before Satan in return for all the kingdoms of the world.

But Jesus was not that sort of Messiah. He was not the sort of Messiah anyone expected. He was without sin or compromise. During His struggles, He relied on the words of scripture, quoting God's Word, recognising the need to love and worship and obey - important truths concerning how **we** can respond to temptations today, relying upon God and His Word in order to stand firm against all manner of trials.

By even suggesting Jesus had got things wrong, was Peter himself being coerced by Satan's desire to divert Jesus from the redemptive work of the cross? Was Satan speaking through the voice of Jesus' close friend?

William Barclay states that it is a strange and sometimes terrible thing, that a tempter speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend. It's possible to love someone so much that you will try to do anything to make them change their minds or re-consider their actions.

Was that Peter? A man showing more love than discretion? A man who loved Jesus so much that he does not want to believe such things were coming? Jesus did have the power to save Himself – but He wasn't about self-preservation. He was selfless.

As Christians today, we are held by the same words Jesus spoke in Caesarea Phillipi: **'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'** The cross was an instrument of death and those who 'took up their cross' in biblical times were on their way to execution.

This passage is a pivotal moment in the Gospel – a watershed moment. Jesus had always been aware of His mission; aware too of the suffering involved and the necessity of the cross which had shadowed His pathway from the very first. Only here, at this point, does Jesus speak openly about it. He knew what was to come. From here on, Jesus turns towards Jerusalem, the inescapable cross and His Death and Resurrection.

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. You have to acknowledge Jesus' honesty! There is no easy way.

What does that now mean for us? What are we willing to endure for the sake of the Gospel? The cost of discipleship means letting go of worldly things that often control our lives, and instead offering our service to growing the kingdom of God. For many of us this cost of discipleship will not be onerous but we know there are Christians the world over who are challenged and suffer for their faith!

Uncertain of the future, warned of terrible things to come, Jesus' listeners were challenged, as we are too.

Follow the way of the world and you will lose your life; follow the way of the cross and you will gain the only life worth having. He asks nothing of us that He did not first face Himself.

Can we see life differently? Can we avoid all those things which lead us away from God and into temptation? Can we move away from ease and comfort to say 'yes' to the voice and command of Jesus? Can we be selfless not self-preserving?

Annie Heppenstall is a teacher with a degree in Theology and Religious Studies from Cambridge University. She asks: **'Can we embrace that which sees beyond self to the higher good of all? The dominant force that is strong enough to make one choose to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and the cross, or indeed to give one's life for the good of others, is LOVE'**.

When Jesus meets Peter on the Galilean shore after the resurrection it is not Peter's loyalty that He questions - He asks Peter an important question: Do you love me Peter? Love with a courage to face all that Peter will face in later life, including his own crucifixion.

Do we love Jesus? Are we willing to take up our cross of witness and service, putting selfish thoughts aside, avoiding those temptations that we know we will face? Are we Christ-centred?

This is a truly challenging passage which asks us afresh: Who is Christ to us and are we able to express that to those who would challenge our faith and commitment?

"Who do you say I am?"

And my prayer is that through study and prayer we may all learn more deeply who He truly is to us, what He means to us and what we may do to draw closer in love to our Saviour.

Amen

Hymn: "Take up your cross" the Saviour said

Charles W Everest

1. Take up your cross," the Saviour said,
"if you would my disciple be;
take up your cross with willing heart,
and humbly follow after me."

2. Take up your cross; let not its weight
fill your weak spirit with alarm;
Christ's strength shall bear your spirit up
and brace your heart and nerve your
arm.

3. Take up your cross, heed not the
shame,
and let your foolish heart be still;
the Lord for you accepted death
upon a cross, on Calvary's hill.

4. Take up your cross, then, in Christ's
strength,
and calmly every danger brave:
it guides you to abundant life
and leads to victory o'er the grave.

Prayers of Intercession:

Father, Your son Jesus Christ asks us to follow Him in carrying the cross.

In Your church, we pray for those who try to follow Jesus in places where Christians are oppressed, abused or killed for their beliefs. Give them strength to carry their cross **and follow in His way.**

In Your world, we pray for those who struggle to live without proper food or clean water, and for those who have lost homes and family in war. Give them strength to carry their cross **and follow in his way.**

In our community, we pray for those who are uncared for and unwanted, for those who have been hurt and cannot forget, for those who are depressed and see no purpose in living and for those who are ill. Give them strength to carry their cross **and follow in His way.**

In our own lives, we pray for courage to choose the way of Christ, whatever it may cost, and to see him in the faces of all who suffer in your world. Give us strength to carry our cross **and follow in His way.**

We ask these prayers in the name of Jesus who taught us to say:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Hymn: O Jesus I have promised

John Ernest Bode

StF 563

1. O Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be thou forever near me,
My Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If thou wilt be my guide.

2. O let me feel thee near me!
The world is ever near:
I see the sights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear.
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within;
But, Jesus, draw thou nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.

3. O let me hear thee speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
Thou guardian of my soul.

4. O Jesus, thou hast promised
To all who follow thee
That where thou art in glory
There shall thy servant be.
And, Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
My Master and my friend.

Blessing:

Living Lord, we have come before You and now we go forth into this week to work for Your kingdom, to proclaim Your love and to make known the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Be with us we pray and grant us grace to serve You, now and always. **Amen.**