

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 24 Year B 2021

The question Our Lord proposes in today's Gospel distills the question the entire New Testament seeks to address and respond to: *who do people say that I am*. We know, and I have spoken about his before, how there are no shortage of options seeking to answer this question. To be clear, the New Testament writers come to a firm conclusion: that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ of God; that he is God's eternal, only-begotten Son; that he is Lord and rightly deserving of that title. In other words, the poor carpenter of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, was and is divine. The conviction of the apostles and of the infant church, dependent as it was on God's own self-disclosure and self-revelation, is what has been held by every faithful and orthodox believer ever since.

But the long history of the church has shown any number of alternatives to this conviction. The New Testament writers already show knowledge of this. Jesus, in the minds of some, we are told, was not the son of God but of Beelzebub! In later controversies Jesus not quite fully human. And in the other direction, not quite fully divine. Later still, Jesus the great moral example, the great teacher, or wise sage. More recently, Jesus the great deceiver (because, in the minds of the cultural elite and plenty of others besides, all religions are basically deceptions, and dangerous deceptions at that, and that applies especially to their founders!). And even Jesus the great fantasy, the delusion, someone who didn't exist at all (even if that means ignoring the compelling weight of historical evidence to the contrary).

Answering the question, *who do people say that I am* has implications. And if we answer in the terms of the New Testament itself, then it has radical implications, life changing, life transforming implications. To settle on the answer the New Testament writers offer us has implications. The faith of the apostolic church has implications. The point simply being that to answer, with Peter, *You are the Christ* changes everything. And if it doesn't, if we can say well, yes, that seems true, but our lives, our minds, our hearts are untouched by this, well then something is amiss, seriously amiss.

The implications to that central and crucial question plays out most forcefully in the second part of today's reading. *If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.'*

Confessing the lordship of Jesus, that he truly is the Christ, *is* a serious belief. And the conviction that shines through the New Testament is that Jesus is worthy, not only of our belief, not only of our faith, but also of our devotion; that he is worthy of our love and our commitment. Devotion here not understood simply as pious sentimentality. Rather, devotion as love! We are to be devoted to him, because we love him! Jesus, worthy of our faith, and worthy of our love and devotion. Which means we will be willing to suffer for love of him. To die even for love of him. Ah! There's the rub. Jesus is Christ. Jesus is Lord. So, how does this change our life? What are the implications of this faith? Well, that we be willing to suffer for him, to die for love of him.

Notice that this not simply a question of accepting suffering that happens to befall us. None of us gets through life without a fair share of knocks and bruises along the way. Suffering is part of the human condition. So, the gospel is not directing us to some sort of Stoic resignation, that is, just put up with the hardships and difficulties that come your way. Rather, Our Lord is telling those who follow him, those who share Peter's confession, who accept his lordship, to *actively* take up their crosses, to seek them out, to carry them as Jesus *willingly* carried his.

And then the great paradox: *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for sake of the gospel, will save it.* When we cling and grasp, we lose; when we let go in radical love, we find. Close your fist on your life and it crumbles to dust; open your hand and let it go, it grows tenfold.

This profound truth is worth keeping in mind as we look with hope to the reopening of our churches before too long. Of course, when this might be remains a great unknown, and as we have become used to, dependent on any number of contingencies. You would all be aware of the national conversation at present, most sharply focused on Melbourne and Sydney, that full participation and inclusion will be dependent on personal vaccination, and not just a percentage of the population. The question of vaccine passports I will not touch on it here, though I made mention of this in my address at Evensong last Sunday night. But it is important to note that the conversation in this country at present is such that the majority voice appears happy to *exclude* some members of our community from full participation. This is a question the church *must not* be shy in addressing. And while we may have something to contribute to the broader conversation, more pressing is how this might affect our life as Christians, especially our shared worship.

A common refrain echoing about us at this time is that things will ‘open up’ only if ‘safe to do so.’ We can probably appreciate the motivation behind this from a public health point of view, though we might wonder how sustainable this is, or even how reasonable it is. But for Christians - within our own life - we must wonder if this is a category that should come into play at all. Let us be clear here. What we might call ‘safety-ism’ is *not* a Christian virtue. The idea finds support by more than a few political leaders, and church leaders as well. But is this this a spiritual response, a theological response? That we might participate in the life of worship only ‘if safe’ is an unhelpful innovation, in fact, an intolerable intrusion, into Christian thought and practice. A basic Christian truth is that the ordering of our life must be *without distinction*. The last few weeks we have been working through the epistle of St James. And this a point the apostle is emphatic upon, as are other NT writers. We cannot permit a situation where participation in worship is the preserve of a few, where the gospel is ministered only to the well. And what a peculiar inversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is...

In the light of the gospel put before us today, we must – all of us – ask the hard question, does an ‘only if safe to do so’ approach sufficiently reflect the *bold demands* our Lord places on his followers? Sharing in the worship of the church is one of the *implications* of confessing the lordship of Christ. It is not an option. It is one of the ways we show our willingness to take up our cross. Is refraining from worship because we deem it ‘unsafe’ the church the martyrs, on whose blood the church was built? Or the church of Fr Damian amongst the lepers of Molokai. Or of the Anglo-Catholic slum priests in 19th Century Britain? Or the church of China, or North Africa, or parts of the Middle East, where faithful will gather *today*, this *very day*, at risk of torture, imprisonment, and even death. And this just goes to highlight the real *spiritual pandemic* at work in the church, at least in the West: a pandemic of convenience. The idea that the faith will be practiced only inasmuch as it does not get in the way with other things happening in my life. Safety-ism is but a symptom of this spiritual disease.

The joy, privilege and duty of Christian worship must not be exchanged either for the spirit of fear nor for some nebulous concept of safety. The gospel of comfort and convenience must be rejected as the phony gospel that it is. We must pray, earnestly pray, as sincere and faithful believers, that, when we are able, we will not hesitate to return; that we be given the courage to resist the spirit that overshadows us at this time. And to recommit to following Jesus Christ, whatever the cost. Amen.