



Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 12 September 2021

READINGS

Proverbs 1: 20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8: 27-38

“Who do people say I am?”

The question Jesus poses in our Gospel reading is of great importance. Firstly, the rendering of this question in Matthew and the response of the disciples in both Mark and Matthew indicate a wide range of eschatological beliefs operating at the time. By way of overview, we see Messianic figures from the Old Testament waiting in the wings. Among those are Moses, Elijah (and perhaps Enoch) who were thought not to have died but to have been translated into heaven. So it was expected they would one day return. Jews today still reserve a seat for Elijah at their Passover dinners. In addition to these figures of the Old Testament, the appearance of a figure known as the Prophet was anticipated, according to John’s Gospel. And then, of course, the long-awaited Messiah was also prophesied.

But even this cursory overview suggests a set of eschatological beliefs more clear-cut than they likely ever would have been. Eschatological beliefs of first-century Jews, particularly those of the general populace, were multifarious and unprecise. A case has also been made, based on a passage in Josephus’ Antiquities, that the Pharisees believed in reincarnation. A belief in reincarnation would explain how some people, according to the disciples, thought that Jesus was Elijah or John the Baptist (although oddly, John the Baptist and Jesus had both been alive at the same time). Herod, according to John’s Gospel, believed that Jesus was John the Baptist revived. And then Jesus himself was supposed to have claimed that John the Baptist was the returned Elijah (Matthew 11:14).

There is an added dimension to this which is the question of what Jesus himself believed, sometimes referred to as Messianic consciousness – to what extent was Jesus himself aware that he was the Messiah? Rudolph Bultmann is among those who famously, and controversially, posited that the enigmatic Son of Man was an eschatological figure other than Jesus, whom Jesus referred to and who Jesus expected to come at the close of the age. Matthew’s version of our Gospel reading suggests that there was a corporate belief in someone known as the Son of Man, as Jesus first questions the disciples as to the identity of the Son of Man, and only after this as to his own identity (Matthew 16:13-16).

All of this is a prelude to more sobering message – the fact of Jesus’ death. One senses the sheer incomprehensibility of this which is perhaps precisely why it is preceded by Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah. To say the Messiah will suffer and die is like a football coach telling his team at the start of the season that they will lose every match. And as if this wasn’t depressing enough, Jesus says his followers must anticipate the same fate as him. (I’m told that members of the Iraqi football team have suffered imprisonment and torture for losing games.)

What is Jesus really saying though? It seems unlikely that he means every disciple will suffer torture and crucifixion, although we know many Christians in the early Church did. But if Jesus is not referring to literal suffering and death, what is he referring to? We could interpret this passage by looking at it psychologically, or in terms of our interior, spiritual staging and journey. This, by the way, is not novel. Many contemplatives would perhaps understand this passage in a similar way.

Dying to self is the end result of a process, admittedly usually occasioned by exterior circumstance of trial or suffering – the loss of a loved one, the loss of job, divorce, or grave illness. Whether we are fortunate enough to realise this or not, each of us has/is a constructed self. The constructed self is a result of both conscious and unconscious layering over many years. It is based partly on the expectations thrust onto us by society, our parents, and our colleagues. It is based partly on who we would like to be, perhaps even who we think we are (but really is not who we are at all). It is based partly on a picture of our 'ideal self'. There is nothing inherently evil about the constructed, it simply is not who we really are.

So if we are to interpret and apply our Gospel reading psychologically, we see that the first part, Jesus' question to the disciples, and Peter's confession, is a question of identity. Who is Jesus? Who is the Son of Man? Likewise, we can ask the same question: who is Matthew? Who are You? This is a central question to all of our journeys. However, though Peter's confession is technically correct, for we believe Jesus was indeed the Messiah, nevertheless the preconceived ideas and images as to who the Messiah was were substantially wrong. Jesus corrects these by prophesying the Messiah's torture and execution. Of course, the disciples cannot begin to comprehend this, much in the same way that we cannot comprehend our own 'death of self' before we actually experience it. And their ears are already blocked to the last part of Jesus' pronouncement – "and after three days rise again." All they have heard is "undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed".

And yet we are left with that injunction which issues us the perennial challenge: "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." May God grant us the grace so to do. Amen