

## **Sermon for Sunday 15 September 2024 – The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity**

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*Isaiah 50.4-9a; Psalm 116.1-8; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-38*

As we gather here today in your name, we pray that you will fill our hearts, Lord, our minds and our souls. Transform us, Lord, and make us more like you through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Questions around identity are not uncommon nowadays, whether it be gender identity, racial or sexual identity, or all those other things that we feel we need to be categorised. We need to have a particular identity. The question 'Who am I?' is one that many of us might wrestle with. Some are very sure of who they are, and others have a crisis of identity. Some struggle to find their place in a world where the adoration of the individual, the celebrity status, and self-promotion on social media platforms are becoming increasingly celebrated and normalised. Mark's gospel reading today becomes a watershed in Jesus's ministry. Jesus encourages quite a different approach, one of self-denial and personal sacrifice for his sake. He talks of servanthood and suffering. The themes of servanthood and suffering connect our Old Testament and Gospel readings. A third of Isaiah's servant's songs speaks of one whose fidelity and trust in God does not falter despite their experience of rejection and suffering.

The song is often interpreted as foretelling the coming of another suffering servant, Jesus Christ, and all that he would experience by way of rejection, humiliation, and pain. When Jesus poses the question to the disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?', he does not do so in a vain or narcissistic as some might in order to receive recognition or glory. But rather, he was evaluating whether or not the disciples had grasped the full measure of who he was, so that he might spell out to them what the true nature of discipleship would be. Jesus says, in indicating to his disciples that whoever wants to be my disciple must take up their cross. Whoever wants to save their life must lose it. This does have the potential to be difficult and a sobering calling. As we know, taking up our cross and following Jesus means being unashamed of our Christian identity and being Christ-like in all things that we do, even when that can be very costly. Peter's confession or declaration gives rise to another, typically Marcan example of the Messianic secret, where Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone who he is, keeping his identity concealed until the appropriate time comes when his glory would be revealed.

We know that for some, elements of their identity cannot be concealed. And because of this, simply being who they are proves costly. Racism, misogyny, discrimination, and social prejudice against people with physical or mental disabilities are some actual crosses borne by so many. We have been witnessing as a society over the last few years, a heightened tension in society

concerning some of these specific forms of prejudice, especially in the violence we observed on our television screens or through social media this summer, after the death of those three girls in Stockport. Listening to the voices of those who have been and continue to be subjected to such oppression and intolerance. It has become clear that as a society, we need to reflect on our attitudes and on how we can care for those less fortunate than ourselves. And that gives us all a question, can we, as a church, not learn to protect the most vulnerable and often despised in our society? And that is often made up of all sorts of different people. We cannot allow suffering to continue mostly by silence, inaction, or even use an incorrect rhetoric or language which can be misunderstood or even in excessive criticism of one another.

It is important that we try and imitate Christ. With the instruction to accept our cross and follow him, Jesus is calling us to imitate him. The taking up of our cross is a metaphor for the Christian life, which, lived out authentically and faithfully, would demand a lot from us. And in fact, it would demand our all. Though many have been martyred for their faith over the centuries, for most of us today, losing our life for the gospel means dying from our old life and taking up or beginning a new life as a Christian, a follower of Christ. God will call us to do different things, bringing our past to the benefit of Christ's mission, not just for ourselves, but for God's Kingdom on Earth. With such a mixed-up world today, it is so much needed. One notable demand is that we place ourselves alongside the suffering and the oppressed, reaching out to them in love and challenging injustice. The Epistle reading from the Book of James today reminds us to use our tongues wisely and be careful what we say. So often our tongues run away with us and we go away and think, 'Oh, I wish I hadn't said that.'

Jesus's invitation to the crowd in the gospel was general and not exclusive, reminding us that in Christ all are equal. Setting our minds on divine things means seeing the world as he does. The Kingdom of God is universal. And so for as long as we permit oppression and discrimination to exist, our prayers that his kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven cannot be realised, but only by his grace and power. Isaiah's song of the suffering and servant asserts, 'Let us stand up together.' How then are we challenged today to stand up together for those who suffer unjustly because of God? That God-given identity. And what ways might Jesus be calling us to use our voice and our will to challenge prejudice against those who are different from us? Truly embracing who we are in Christ, letting go of selfish ambition and desires, and setting our mind on heavenly things is a call to uncompromising fidelity to Christ and his command to love God and our neighbour. This includes a radical love without limits and the relentless pursuit of justice, freedom and peace for God's children, wherever they are, and wherever they are in the world without exception.

Working together as a community of Christians and followers of Christ, it is through the light of Christ that we all have a hope for the future of our world. Amen.