

It's Not about Success

Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 16 September 2018

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 116: 1-9; James 2: 18-26; Mark 8: 27-38

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+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Let's face it: we humans are all natural worshippers of the god of success. We hate to fail, to be passed over, to be overtaken by others in today's standard life-project, which is to look good, feel good and make good. This is partly to do with the way we copy others on the path to looking like winners: new cars, new houses, new jobs, new spouses. Envy is the way we humans operate, and rivalry is the result. And if this competition builds up a head of steam, if it gets out of hand, there's the tried and true method of scapegoating some innocent bystander so we can let off steam and all be in agreement that this outsider is the problem. Then we all feel better and life gets back to normal. This is what we see exposed in today's set of readings, and indeed all the time as we gather to hear God's word together.

Look at Peter in today's Gospel, as the superlatives start coming thick and fast from the crowd about who Jesus is: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets back from the dead. 'No', says Peter, swept up in the moment, 'I can top that: he's the Messiah, the Son of God'. In other words, 'our boy is number one, better than all the rest, and so we who follow him are better than all the rest'. Do you see where this is going? Here we see revealed the rivalry at the heart of all sorts of religious conflicts, and still today. No wonder Jesus is having none of it. He commands Peter to be quiet and stop talking like this. It's not that Jesus isn't the Messiah. Rather, it's that Jesus is redefining who the Messiah is, and who God is, and what success is, and who we are. He's opting out of the game of tit for tat, of 'I'm better than you'—the game that escalates so naturally and leads to so many of the world's problems. 'If this is all you understand Messiah to mean', Jesus replies, 'then it would be better if you kept quiet about it'.

So Jesus warns off all his zealous followers, then and now, who want to big-note him, and themselves, by putting others down. If Jesus is Lord, friends, then that's good news for all the faiths and all the religions, not bad news, because on Planet Jesus the God we meet is *for all of us against none of us*, a God who

wants to lead us beyond envy and rivalry to a new way of being human.

Now, friends, for you and for me, we have to act as if we believe this in the way we live our lives. This is the faith *with* works that our epistle today demands. The faith Jesus commends isn't a comfortable idea, a static place of certainty, smug and self-contained. Rather, it's an open place of risk where we show the world a different way. Christian faith isn't a deposit of self-assured certainty as much as a habit of mind and action—faith lives in our hearts and our muscles, you can read it off our daily planners and our credit card statements; it's not a preserve of the mind but the shape of an active life committed to making a difference.

Such genuine Christian faith needs to be lived out, and it means rejecting the God of success. This is why mature Christianity makes you tough. It allows you in time to rise above the diagnosis of cancer, that means the dream is over. It helps you pick yourself up and dust yourself off after you've fallen on your face—losing a job through your own stupidity, for instance, or a marriage. It allows you to learn from your mistakes rather than spend a lifetime nursing hurts and coddling a bruised ego. Christianity is red meat for robust

human living or, if you prefer a vegetarian image, it's wholegrain for a healthy human heart.

But if all this is the good news, now we come to the bad news. It's not just that we have to question the gospel of success. It goes further than that. God's people are regularly called to suffer, and suffer without deserving it, so we show the world just how it works, just what unjust and destructive spirits lurk in our universal obsession with success, with winning, with being number one.

In our Isaiah reading today, faithful Israel, the whole people of God in exile, takes on the mantle of teacher of the nations. And it's Israel's suffering that shows the nations what they're truly like—how the naturally envious human drive to success makes rivalry inevitable, so it accelerates into the violent war of each against all, until a scapegoat is needed that everyone can agree is the problem. Hence the history of anti-Semitism, with Israel serving as a convenient innocent scapegoat throughout history, and still in our own time in the face of bitter hatred from other parts of the Middle East. Sadly Israel and certain of her friends internationally too-readily return the favour by hating back, and God's demanding vocation for Israel, to be the suffering servant who reveals the truth about history, is aborted.

In turn, Jesus takes up the vocation of Israel in person, crucified as the chief troublemaker to restore peace by uniting everyone against him—the Romans and the Jews, Herod and Pilate. But in Jesus' innocent death the truth is revealed, along with the great lie that makes peace by means of scapegoating the innocent. Hence Jesus' resurrection is God's great vindication of every innocent victim. In the words of Isaiah today, 'The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.' No wonder the earliest Christians applied this teaching about Israel to Jesus himself.

Friends, you and I are told by Jesus today that we may well need to share in his vocation of innocent suffering, not because suffering is good for us, but because God needs a community of people in the world who will reveal the truth by letting the world do its worst and by acting with faith in the face of it, revealing the alternative that God brings. So the faith we're given and the works it requires are going to mean taking up Jesus' cross, which is our contribution to making the world a better place.

Taking this path will certainly bring opposition, rejection, suffering and scapegoating for us, because prophets are usually unwelcome and need to be silenced. This isn't the path to success of course: sticking your neck out, asking awkward questions and refusing to go quietly. But a community that takes the part of the victim, suffering in a way that reveals its innocence, without the normal human reaction of bitter recrimination and payback—friends, this is a community that demonstrates the faith and the works that we see in Jesus.

The Lord be with you...