

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2021

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 8 27-38

If there is anything positive in the current Lockdown season it is perhaps, for some, the opportunity to read. To read simply for the sake of reading. Not emails, instructions, news bulletins or agendas, but poetry and sacred scripture, fine prose and ancient wisdom. All too often, I confess, I read the scriptures looking for something; a hook on which to base a sermon, a word to offer as consolation or a thought on which to frame a prayer. No bad things, but quite often such reading is fruitless. It borders on a utilitarian response to the scriptures.

I know this is not the way to approach our sacred texts and today's Old Testament passage from Isaiah, taken from the poetic 'second Isaiah' is a case in point. This is poetry at its finest and is worthy of a slow, careful read. 'Poetry does nothing' wrote the poet WH Auden and this is a great truth. Poring over the scriptures hoping that we might just stumble on a word that resonates, that 'does something,' is not the way to allow scripture to speak. The poetry from Isaiah does nothing, but it engages us at another level.

What good poetry does is spark our imagination. 'The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,' so opened our reading this morning. Who is speaking? The prophet almost certainly but on whose lips is he placing those words. Later we hear 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.' In the Christian imagination we have placed these words in the context of Jesus. But scriptural poetry speaks to us, they are words to be found on our lips too.

There are times when we need to set aside context, to let a reading speak into our situation. This poetry is calling for an alternative imaginative vision, what is your vision? Like any alternative idea it is being challenged; what challenges lie in the way of your vision? It is a shared vision, let us stand up together! With whom do you share your vision? The prophet tells us that a vision borne out of a life of faith will be vindicated. To look in the scriptures for answers is often fruitless, more importantly we look to scriptures to find questions, to listen carefully and to allow the scriptures to fire our imaginations.

'Who do you say that I am?' We are in the very centre of Mark's gospel, a pivotal moment. At the very heart of the gospel lies a question. Peter has a crack 'you are the Messiah' you the Christ, the chosen one, the anointed one. Yes, yes! Peter is expressing the hope of them all, the disciples, the crowd gathered around the entire nation of Israel; at last, the saviour, the hope of the nations had come. But at this pivotal moment Jesus challenges them to step outside these well-worn categories, and to imagine what this

might mean. For Peter and the others this is an imaginative leap too far, and so to answer his own question he takes Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration. In effect Jesus is revealed on the mount as a 'sacrament' of God and for many of us in broadly speaking the catholic tradition this is crucial because it is in the idea of sacramentalism that we exercise our imaginations; as one writer put it 'Religion... is imagination before it's anything else.'

The 'Winter Journey' book group that some of us have just concluded has been an exercise in theological imaginings. Importantly we have not concluded with a neat set of answers, but we have discovered some of the questions. To the question what is God like? We were taken on a journey from a seemingly rather severe, demanding, elderly relative to a shattered young man hanging from a scaffold. Which raised the question to what end? 'God so loved the world?' What might that mean for us? We glimpsed the sacramentality of the world, not just its beauty and order but its intrinsic worth and to our call to love the physical world to such a degree that we sense within it some transcendent meaning, something that points beyond itself – the essence of sacrament thought.

Jesus challenges the disciples to think again about the very nature of life, the things that we cling to; the things to which we give worth. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' What can he mean, what am I being called to deny and what is my cross? The theology of the cross in the Winter Journey was a theology of accompaniment and in it we can glimpse the answer to the question 'who do you say that I am?' I goes something like: you are living God come among us to be in solidarity with us with our suffering and death and not just us but the entire creation. And we in turn are called to be in solidarity with all creation, the creation which groans with eager longing.

This requires of us an imaginative leap. It requires of us to ask questions - how do we view creation? As William Blake wrote 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way.' What is our vision? And with whom do we share it? What of the question how do you say that I am? Do we see in Jesus, the embodiment of the creator, who comes among us to be at one with the creation, the world that he loves; and to die in solidarity with that creation? Do we see ourselves to be at one with that creation and therefore in solidarity with the God who in Christ comes to show us that self-giving love is the way of new creation.

The sacramental life is one that opens our imaginations. Now is perhaps the time to fire that imagination. Look around you, consider your place within the creation and contemplate on the scriptures. Don't look for answers, look for questions. Amen.