

(Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38)

This weekend, we are recalling the horror of the 9/11 tragedy, twenty years ago. As we revisit the collapse of the Twin Towers the classic question, ‘Where were you that day?’ springs to mind. And in recent days in Afghanistan, where a vacuum of order was rapidly filled, the question ‘What has been achieved there in those twenty years?’ may also come to mind. On that day in 2001 we saw the explosive reality of pure evil; today we recognise more than ever that the battle between the forces of good and evil is a constant one; that a military presence is part of the process of building a ‘peaceable kingdom’.

Now the iconic Twin Towers of New York’s World Trade Centre boasted 110 stories. Each. By contrast, in Newcastle the National Centre for Children’s Books boasts 7 stories. As we learnt in last month’s Parish Magazine, that building is iconic in its own way, not only because of its design but also its name. It is said that any story will have one of just seven archetypal plots. These include comedy, tragedy, and rebirth.

We have gathered in worship today because we believe in the ‘ultimate form’ of the rebirth plot. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so much more than ‘rebirth’ – or even ‘re-incarnation’. It showed that the reality of evil has been defeated, once for all, and it points towards the final victory of the establishment of the peaceable Kingdom of God.

Part of any service of worship is the sermon – in which together we explore God’s holy word and listen to what he is saying to us. Those who know about these things tell us that just as there are seven basic stories in literature so there are five basic styles of preaching. These include the old-fashioned ‘3 point’ sermon – which thankfully seems to have been edged out by the so-called ‘narrative’ style. This is a re-telling of the resurrection story in a contemporary way. Whatever the preaching style, any sermon should always proclaim the resurrection.

So as you will see, this sermon will be in the ‘narrative’ style – and it will have just one point: to proclaim the resurrection!

To set the scene then, let me ask you to imagine we are witnessing a discussion between Jesus and his disciples – just as we might watch a television discussion involving a panel of speakers. As we look on, we are passive observers, with Jesus and his disciples clearly unaware that we are watching.

Now, the context of the discussion is the reading from Mark’s gospel we have just heard. We know that Jesus has begun at this point deliberately to disclose to his disciples exactly who he is. Up until this point, which is half-way through Mark’s gospel, Jesus had been very selective in what he had said and done. This was an attempt to keep his identity as the Son of God secret from the authorities. Jesus knew that as soon as the authorities caught on to his claims they would close in on him, preventing him from proclaiming the reality of the Kingdom of God. By now there had been sufficient one-off examples of his teaching and healing to have revealed beyond doubt the nature of that reality. Jesus knows that he can no longer contain the people’s response. The secret is out, and the first thing he must do is prepare his disciples for what the authorities will do to him.

So he asks them, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ Looking on, we see that he gets a range of answers; then he asks them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ It is Saint Peter who declares ‘You are the Messiah’. In saying this Peter is acknowledging that it is indeed the Son of God whom he is addressing. I need hardly add that this is a dramatic claim of truly epic proportions!

But as we look on as passive observers of this discussion, we might imagine a further stage: Jesus turns from his disciples and faces the audience directly. As he looks, he says to each one of us, ‘And who do *you* say that I am?’ Suddenly, we are no longer passive observers. We are faced with a question of life-changing proportions, infinitely more so that a ‘Where were you on that day?’ level of enquiry. As we watch, we are aware that the Son of God is now addressing us individually. Do we have the confidence to echo Peter’s response? Or do we deep down want to hedge our bets?

Perhaps our response will depend on the expression we see written on the face of Jesus, and on the tone we hear in his voice, as he asks his question. And what we see and hear will to some extent depend on what we expect to see and hear. Do we somehow imagine the Son of God to be severe and judgmental, or gentle and loving?

It was the biblical scholar William Barclay who coined the memorable phrase that Jesus ‘shows us what God is like’. In his teaching and healing Jesus had shown God to be very much at the ‘gentle and loving’ end of the spectrum. His willingness to die for us on the Cross proved that beyond any doubt.

So when we hear God in Christ asking us personally, ‘And who do you say that I am?’ we must not think he is trying to catch us out. He is willing us to enter in to relationship with him, to love him and trust him – and ultimately in becoming like him to ‘reign with him in glory’.

Another memorable phrase, coined by St Irenaeus, is this: ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive’. We see this vividly in Jesus; we see it also in the occasional and somewhat lower-resolution glimpses we catch every so often in others. But God’s will for each of us is that we may become fully alive; to become fully Christlike.

In the Rule of Saint Benedict it is stated simply that our love of Christ must come before all else: it is to be our absolute priority – not out of some misplaced sense of duty but because it is precisely this that makes us fully alive.

So we choose to ‘be in the world but not of it’, or as the spiritual writer Esther de Waal puts it, ‘to accept the material but not be bound by it’. She goes on to add: ‘Separation from the world is not primarily an act of distancing or detachment, but an act of joining oneself to Christ and the [Christian] community... No Christian can scorn the world for which Christ died’.

This is what Jesus is outlining in the remainder of today’s gospel reading. He warns his disciples – and us, for we are no longer passive observers – ‘to set our minds on divine things, not on human things’.

Echoing the teaching of Saint James in our second reading, the Rule of Saint Benedict explores how we may show our love of Christ by striving to make our behaviour different from the world's way: to 'rid our hearts of all deceit'. We know from the events of history, from the world of literature, and from our own lives, that deceit can have no place in building the peaceable Kingdom of God. To borrow the powerful image of Saint James, we know that if we our lives are 'rudderless' then we will by definition be living without direction.

Benedict speaks of our need for a 'workshop' in which to learn how to use the tools of holiness, and of our need for 'stability' so that we who belong together can help each other grow in holiness. May our belonging to this community – church and town – meet both those needs.

Let us pray.

Gracious Father, who made Benedict a wise master in the school of your service: grant that we may put your love before all else, and seek with joy the way of your commandments; through Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen