

13th September 2015

Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson

PENTECOST 16B WESLEY 10.30 SERMON 13-9-15

Now, most of us here this morning are Christians. We believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. But why? Think about it. What reasons do we give? Do those reasons include anything about Jesus having died for our sins? Or, the Resurrection? That is fine from the position 2,000 years later. But, why did those first disciples realize that Jesus was the longed for Messiah? He wasn't raising an army to defeat the Romans and free Israel. So that meant that he didn't fit the traditional idea of the Messiah. He certainly hadn't been crucified and raised from the dead at that point. He was fit and active, able to walk considerable distances on rough roads. They enjoyed his company. What was it about Jesus that made them accept him as their Messiah or Lord?

Cynthia Bourgeault is an American writer who has considered this question. She says that we have to recognize Jesus in a mutual heartfelt way. She gives as an example, the Samaritan woman at the well who asked for water and ended by asking for the eternal water which Jesus could give. She understood that this was a metaphorical term and she recognized the special nature of Jesus just as he had recognized that she was someone who was ready for what he had to say. (The Wisdom Jesus, p12)

So it was then and still is, that those who have had a vital connection with Jesus remain as Christians. Those who haven't made the deeply personal connection with Jesus drift away. It is that depth of interaction with Jesus which makes for devoted, faithful followers of Jesus.

Peter and the other disciples had met him at that deep level.

The gospel writer was telling the story to an early community of Christians, perhaps living in Italy. It probably dates from the late 60s or more than 30 years after the Resurrection. All the readers or listeners, knew the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. There was no need for a spoiler alert. Indeed, it has been said that this gospel was written to explain just why Jesus was crucified and raised. Today's reading comes at the midpoint of the gospel of Mark. It is a pivotal moment.

Earlier, Jesus had been moving about the northern parts of the country and areas just outside Israel, teaching and healing. People were talking about him and he'd acquired a big following. He fed the multitudes who had come to him. Then, Jesus asked the disciples who it was that these people thought he could be. And the answer was that some thought that Jesus was John the Baptist and others thought Elijah. But Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the long awaited one - greater than either of those prophets.

It was quite a call for Peter to make, even though he didn't fully understand what it entailed. Clearly, Peter and the disciples had been learning the message of love for others. Jesus must have been a dynamic person with the leadership

and skills to meet people at their core. Even so, they had hoped that he would rid Israel of its Roman overlords. Jesus said “No”, that was not what was intended. Jesus was asking the disciples to accompany him on the way. When Jesus was attacked so too would the disciples be attacked. Following Jesus meant a complete change in the way their lives were ordered. Jesus started to spell out just what was going to be the future for him and those who followed him and Peter couldn’t accept that there would be death.

Jesus was asking his disciples to break away from their traditional family and cultural groupings and form a new community. This was much more shocking then than it would be today. Then, all of society depended on the family and group loyalties. In sickness and old age, it was family and community that would support a person. Even the system of begging was part of the social structure of the day, hard as it may seem now.

Life in general in those times, was hard and belligerent. Children were treated like slaves – there was little of the loving nurture that we think of as normal these days. And slaves were accepted as part of the natural order of things.

But Jesus modeled a life that was quite different. In the world which Jesus taught about, there was mercy and peace and kindness to others. It was an entirely new way of living and would have been thought of as peculiar or soft by many.

The way of Jesus is the wisdom of God by which all other wisdom, worldly or that of faith must be assessed. It is the wisdom which had been brought to the people of Israel for centuries. The book of Proverbs is one of the wisdom writings and tells in an allegorical way, the importance of living a life which values wisdom over shallow thinking. We should not be taken in by popular ideas. It is up to us to think through issues carefully and apply our understanding of the message Jesus brought to each case. As the woman personifying wisdom in the Proverbs reading says, death and destruction befall the wayward and complacent, while life without fear awaits those who heed her call. This is the twofold path of wisdom and folly taken to the end of the road, death for the foolish, and life for the wise. It doesn’t sound all that comfortable, does it? But then, when we are committed to following God’s way, we don’t think in terms of comfort or not – we just do what God wants.

The New Testament letter writer, James, also wrote words of wisdom. This morning we heard him write of being careful about what we say. God used words in a creative way but words can also be harmful. We can say cruel things, often without thinking. Do we criticize people behind their backs? How can we use our words to do good? How should we be peacemakers? How should we comfort and support others when they are in distress? It comes back to what is in our heart. Do we have Jesus as the centre of our lives? When we concentrate on the message of Jesus then the words we speak will reflect that. We will be kind and supportive. It would not occur to us to verbally attack another.

A few days ago, our Prime Minister, Mr Abbott announced that Australia would be taking 12,000 refugees from Syria over the next year. Many of these will be Christians who have had to flee their own country. There have been Christians in Syria and neighbouring countries since the earliest days of the spread of the faith. Cynthia Bourgeault points out that the Christians of that part of the world put an emphasis on wisdom rather than salvation as the Western church did. So worship is different. Of course we already know that the Greek and other orthodox churches are different to ours. Even the beliefs of Roman Catholic or Quakers and so on vary. If you google the National Council of Churches in Australia, you will find that the Syrian Christian church is already a member as is the Coptic Church from Egypt and so on. If we are open to learn, then our experience of our faith can only be enriched by interaction with migrant Christians from other parts of the world. We may find that our own understanding of Jesus is just one in a spectrum of understandings.

Like so many new steps in life, we go into them with great expectations but find that things are not what we had imagined. The writer of Mark clearly wanted to make the readers or hearers of the gospel sit up and apply the question “Who do you say I am” to themselves.

Acknowledging Jesus as Lord or Messiah comes when we recognize him as someone who is perfectly in tune with God. We feel that we have to be close to Jesus – always. The thought of not being close to Jesus and not following his teaching leaves us feeling empty, bereft.

When we truly say “you are the Messiah” then we are committing ourselves to life with Jesus, having concern for all that happens in the world. Doing what we can to ease the pain and suffering, not just of people around us but of people we don’t know, even people in other countries. It is a way of life that takes part in God’s creation and loves and cares for it and does not destroy. It is a way of life that rejects the self-centred and the selfish.

A Christian asks- what was it that Jesus taught? How did he model the life that God wanted? We have to take it seriously and be prepared to change our way of living and our ideas. We have to reject mindlessly going along with the crowd. We have to be prepared to stand up for our beliefs. We have to be prepared to speak out when we see an injustice and put our money where our words are. Sometimes that is uncomfortable or difficult. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that being one of his followers meant all of that. As he said: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

So remember that we are like those early Christians. We understand that Jesus Christ truly was the Messiah and that we follow his life of peace and love no matter what the consequences are for ourselves.
Amen.