Isaiah 50: 4-9a; James 3: 1-12; Mark 8: 27-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

In this week’s Gospel reading, Jesus presents his followers with a big theology, intended to inspire them to become big-hearted people. This workshop in practical theology aims to make them aware of the relationship between their theological beliefs and their ethical commitments. He invites them to consider their beliefs about God and about his own mission—and to consider how these beliefs are connected to their understanding of leadership and power.

The College of Bishops has met in Oxford this last week – all the diocesan and suffragan bishops across the Church of England – it’s quite difficult to work out exactly how many of them there are, but apparently a hundred and something were there – and they spent a big chunk of their time going through the latest document on human sexuality, called something like: Life and Love in Faith. And I, like many others, thought: Here we go again. Not because it’s not important – it so is – but because the church seems to be constantly failing to make significant progress in defining how it feels about same-sex marriage. I know how I feel – but I’m not a proper theologian and I have no power….

However, be that as it may, my sources at the College gathering seemed to think that a great deal of rich and encouraging material has been produced over the course of the last year or so, but scripture – and the history of the Church – are both deeply complex areas. So we can just continue to watch this space…

And all that is not simply me having a rant – I think it does connect with today’s gospel. Who do people say that I am, asks Jesus. Which necessitates also addressing the other side of the coin: who are we in response to who Jesus is to us? How are we becoming like Christ? Which is, in so many ways, the purpose of the exercise. We need to produce some sort of answer to that.

As we think about our own answers, one of the things we need to do is to make sure that those answers are as big as possible – we need to at least try to acknowledge the immensity of God, and God’s embrace of us, and what that means. How do I enter into that and become like that? I know ‘discipline’ is a dirty word, but what are the practices and disciplines I need to engage in in order to become like that. It is certainly not going to happen by magic, but it will happen as I learn to pay attention to who I think we both are.

It was Rowan Williams, previous Archbishop of Canterbury – one of my favourite theologians on those occasions when I can work out what it is that he is saying! - who said, on the subject of Christian ethics, that we need to be sure that we are not giving crosses to other people to bear. We need to be clear that we are not simply passing the burden to someone else. That some of these crosses belong to us and not to someone else. When we demand the cheapest food, or clothing, or holidays, all we are doing – and I’m as guilty as the next person – is passing the cost to someone else. Who is usually the one who can least afford it.

But our power as consumers gives us that ability. And daily, we abuse that power. A friend of mine has recently unsubscribed to Amazon Prime, at least partly in the light of the current Archbishop of Canterbury’s comments last week. I suspect I may need to work on that one too.

And I have talked before about the year when the diocese of Truro increased its request for parish share – the annual amount needed by the Church of England to maintain priests in churches and train new ones and sustain the mission of the church - by 28% across the board, for every church, in one fell swoop. I am told that when the people of another diocese complained about rises in parish share, citing the millions of pounds in assets held by the Church Commissioners, the comeback was: those millions are just a small percentage of that which is in the accounts of church members……. In other words, we cannot duck issues we don’t like by placing responsibility where it does not belong.

Not that any of this taking up one’s cross thing is about masochism; it is quite simply about the willingness to take responsibility for one another. I talk about it regularly in wedding sermons. Bearing burdens for one another – each according to their means. It is about recognising that the potential for suffering – or bearing burdens – is a part of faith, of discipleship. Taking the burden of someone else because they need a break.

If we think in terms of ourselves making sacrifices, it is hard. If we think in terms of big-hearted theology, it is less so.

I remember a dear elderly friend, who had carpal tunnel problems in both hands. She lives alone and her car was her independence, but, however reluctantly, she returned her driving licence – she wasn’t prepared to risk the damage she might cause to others if she lost control of the car. She laid aside her own needs and desires for the good of people she would largely never know.

Jesus recognises Peter’s words for what they are – a temptation to take the easy, human way of quick wins. And Jesus rejects the call of Satan as he did before in the wilderness. Peter and the other disciples – just as we are - are called to follow the Messiah as he really is, not as we might want him to be. It is about obedience in treading God’s way, rather than creating a faux-Christian life that fits conveniently into our own plans.

 In ministry as in every other walk of life, sometimes we say the right thing, and sometimes we say something that is absolutely the wrong thing. James touched on this when he said that tongues can be used for blessing and for cursing. Peter has done exactly this today: he spoke something profound and beautiful in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, and then almost immediately he spoke crassly, completely undermining his first statement as he tried to stop Jesus from talking about his future suffering and death. Our challenge as Christians is to embrace the difficult bits as much as we take joy in the nice bits.

So our own progress and achievements, our enjoyment and our success are not to be our priority. Naturally they have their place – we are humans living on earth - but that place is not as the whole focus of our energy and attention. Rather, we are to set ourselves on God: which means loving our neighbour and working towards a fairer world.

 It can be painful to live and work within a church that sometimes seems too hidebound to move and change. It can be painful to be public as a Christian in the face of unbelief in our work and social circles. It can be painful to be inclusive of all people when the walls of prejudice are built so high.

Contradicting the powers that be got Martin Luther into trouble. But he didn’t take the easy way out. He understood who Jesus was to him and who he was in relation to God, and he said: ..my conscience is captive to the Word of God … Here I stand. I can do no other.

And that really isn’t martyrdom; that is simple, honest discipleship.

**Amen**