



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida
A Homily by the Rev'd Jo Popham

“Finding our true selves”
Lent 2B – February 25, 2024
Mark 8:31-38

Who do we say that we are? When we are with those who believe as we do, we might self-identify ourselves as followers of Christ Jesus, but when we are at work or on the golf course, when we are having coffee with friends, do we claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior? Now, I know that some of us do. But do most Christians claim who we are and whose we are?

Jesus was traveling outside Israel, visiting the villages around Caesarea Philippi outside of Jewish territory. And there in not-so-friendly territory, he asked his disciples “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him rightly “You are the Messiah.” Simon Peter grasped that Jesus was “the one” – that he was the Messiah – but he interpreted Messiah in the context of 1st century contemporary Jewish understanding. The Jews looked forward to the Messianic Age – a time of universal peace – with no crime, no war, no poverty – to an age when the Kingdom of God would BE – would actually come to earth. The Messiah would be a king – a great high priest who would be anointed by God to rule and to herald global peace to the end of history. This future king of Israel – the anointed Messiah – would be descended from the line of David.

Peter's understanding would have been that the Messiah certainly would not be expected to suffer. So when Jesus predicted his passion, suffering, rejection, his death, and resurrection after three days, Peter reacted. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him. But in front of the other disciples Jesus rebuked Peter telling all the disciples to “take up their cross and follow him” – and he is telling us 21st century followers – to take up our crosses and follow him. What sends chills down my spine is that if they – and we – are ashamed of Jesus and his words, then Jesus will turn away from them and us when he comes again in his glory. Wow!

Are we ashamed to claim who we are and whose we are? We are Christians, members of the Episcopal Church. If we cannot say to the world and to our friends and foes alike, to people in our own adulterous and sinful generation that we are God's people and followers of his son Jesus Christ, are we ashamed of him?

Israel had become an adulterous people for they had turned away from God. Do we turn away from God? Is our sacred life and secular life one and the same? Do we bring the sacred into our secular world? Or do we tarnish the sacred with secular values? Can we be true to who we are and whose we are? Can we in our world be true to ourselves? And do we really have to take up our own crosses to be able to follow Jesus?

We all know that the cross was a means of Roman execution and that condemned persons had to carry their own cross to the scene of their own death. If we fully accept Jesus's messages must we take on the promise of the cross – must we be willing to risk death for our beliefs? Jesus was telling the disciples and the crowds that indeed they who had faith – even in the face of death – that they would find life. (Remember the criminal crucified next to Jesus who submitted to divine authority? He was no longer subject to Roman authority but only to God and so he gained entrance into paradise.)

How can we 21st century people who trust that modern science can hold off suffering and death at any cost embrace the cross – embrace death? We have such benefits here in this country and in many first world countries. Our modern medical system can sustain life. We can hold death off for days or months and sometimes even years. But let's face it, we are all dying. And death is nothing but the doorway to eternal life, if we are believers. But, in Greek, the word life is psyche, meaning one's very being, one's true self. Jesus told his followers – and that includes us – that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [his] sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them [and us] to gain the whole world and forfeit ... life? Indeed, what can they [and we] give in return for ... life?” (Mark 8:35-37).

Jesus was teaching and continues to teach that what is most important is that we find our true selves. I reiterate, what is vital is that we find and live into our true selves.

Do we give up our true selves – our life – if we deny Jesus Christ – and if we do not live the Gospels? I pray we never forsake him or the truth of the gospels.

This Lent we have the opportunity to examine who we are and whose we are. We can choose to follow Jesus – even to the cross – and in doing so we will find out who we are. If we follow our Lord and Savior we will have life – we will know him more fully and know our true selves. Then we must be true to ourselves – to who we are.

My friends, this is of utmost importance. We must live who we are. And we are Christians. Even when we are threatened by the powers of the world, we must find our true selves and live that life, so that we may have life here on earth and life eternal. It is my prayer that we will do just that, find and live into our true selves and identify with Jesus the Christ, the Messiah and identify ourselves with the good news Jesus brought us.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.