

## *Cross Bearing*

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 24  
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Sunday, September 13, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 116:1-9;  
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Actor Rex Harrison and his wife Elizabeth were dining with a few friends at the 21 Club. While they were preparing to order, as happens so often with actors, a young man got up from a nearby table and came over to meet them. "We just got in on the last flight," he said. "You've given me so much pleasure through the years, Mr. Harrison; I just had to come over to thank you." Harrison nodded his head graciously and returned his attention to the wine list.

"What a very odd fellow," Harrison said later. "I don't know why he made such a fuss over his last flight. I came in on the last flight from London, but I don't go on about IT, do I?" "Rex," said his wife, "that was James Lovell. He just came back from flying around the moon." Had Harrison only known!

It is interesting, don't you think, how knowing who it is we are with can make a world of difference? "Who do people say that I am?" is Jesus' question to His disciples. The question comes as a sort of thunderbolt out of the blue until we understand its context.

First, this section of the gospel is the turning point in Jesus' ministry. From now on He will be on His way, with the disciples, to Jerusalem. And we all know what that means.

Second, Caesarea Philippi was the center for the worship of Baal. It was also located in the region of Panion, so named because of its allegiance to the Greek god Pan. Jesus and His disciples were in the midst of competing religious allegiances, beliefs, and gods. So Jesus takes the opportunity to clarify for His followers exactly who He is. When asked who He was, the disciples, bless them, were ready enough with their answers.

Ignoring Baal and Pan, they responded out of their Jewish experience. "Some say John the Baptist," was their first response. A royal response, wouldn't you say, for that's who Herod thought He was.

"Others," continued the disciples, "say you are Elijah." A stunning response. For it was believed that Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, was to return before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. His arrival would herald the coming of the Messiah. But there was more. Others believed Jesus to be one of the Prophets.

A remarkably varied response to Jesus' simple question. All of which prompts a second, more startling question, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

The people of our time have many and various identities for Jesus also. Some see Him as a great teacher, others as a great moralist, others as a miracle worker; the list does go on, doesn't it? Which prompts us to give pause as we consider our answer to Jesus' second question, who do we say Jesus is?

Maybe we have never considered that question for ourselves. Perhaps that question has never been asked of us. If we are asked, do you think our response would be as quick as Peter's "You are the Messiah!" which has a sort of Sunday school, a type of confirmation ring of certainty to it, doesn't it?

Peter, this time, is right on the money. But, surprise, surprise, that answer isn't quite simple and straightforward as it sounds. What is going on here? The gospel raises the question of what it means for believers say, to confess that Jesus is the Messiah. The whole thing begins quite innocuously and it elicits a series, a recital, of possible identities.

Until Jesus asks what the disciples say, what we say. Peter's answer, and ours, most assuredly, is Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. In a heartbeat Jesus tells the disciples, and us, what it means to call Him, to confess Him, as the Messiah. His instruction is neither comforting nor easy, for Jesus teaches them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. So Jesus defines exactly what type of Messiah He is.

Now that is just too much for Peter. At least Peter is diplomatic and confidential. He takes Jesus aside to tell Him how things really are in the world. If only Mark had recorded the conversation that we might know just how this little tete-a-tete went down.

Peter is the one who voices the objection to any notion that the Messiah must suffer, be rejected and die. His objection wasn't at all as emotional and unthinking as it might appear at first blush. Rather, Peter was astoundingly perceptive. Better than anyone else he realized the contradiction in any notion of a suffering, dying Messiah. He expressed a universal complaint about a scandal at the heart of the Christian faith.

Perhaps we share Peter's objection in our own 21<sup>st</sup> century way. Is it not true to say that we expect our allegiance to Christ Jesus, our faith in God, to protect us from danger, strife, and conflict, and provide us with a solid set of values for successful living? It's a message we hear often, is it not? It lies at the heart of contemporary political rhetoric and at the core of many popular preachers' sermons.

So it is that the cross comes to be understood as an obstacle to be avoided or overcome, and not as an essential part of God's plan of salvation. Peter's objection to a crucified Messiah arises out of good common sense, a logical way of thinking, but it is a human perspective, and Jesus is offering God's point of view.

The notion that there is a way to Easter other than through the pain and rejection of Good Friday continues to be offered as good common sense. The view is, religion should protect people from conflict and provide a solid set of values for successful living. At least that is what is asserted.

Rather than being bypassed, Jesus says, the cross is to be borne. Peter was not unaware that trouble was brewing.

Jesus was popular with the crowds, but problematic, to say the least, for the governing and religious authorities. It would come as no surprise to him or his fellow disciples that their future may well be fraught with danger. Yet Peter caught a glimpse of the divine necessity even though he protests to Jesus with vehemence, albeit discreetly and privately. Jesus' reaction to Peter's protest is to see it as another temptation to divert Him from His Messianic calling. He rebukes Peter in bone chilling, soul shrinking terms, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

What began as a simple question of identity ends up as a radical and challenging description of the Christian life. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Jesus' exhortation is crystal clear: Those who follow Him will be destined to walk the same sort of journey on which He has embarked.

What does it mean to take up one's cross, deny oneself, and follow Jesus? The answer differs with circumstances and needs, but one story embodies some of the spirit and courage of being such a disciple: Invading hordes of ruthless warriors swept through a town and discovered that the monks in a nearby monastery had fled, except for one, who chose to remain behind. The leader of the barbarians marched to the monastery and kicked in its gate. The lone monk stood there in the courtyard. The warrior glared at this humble figure. "Do you know who I am? I am he who can run you through with a sword without batting an eyelash." The monk stood his ground and studied the savage calmly. "And do you know who I am?" he answered. "I am one who can let you run me through with a sword without batting an eyelash."

The grace of God extended to us through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ has enormous expense both for God and for those who seek to follow Jesus has led the way. Such grace is not cheap.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament, grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is poured out without hesitation or limit. It is grace without price, without costs. Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without cross, grace without the incarnate Jesus Christ. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. It is costly because it calls us to do discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it gives them their lives.

In the end, I think the life of discipleship, the life of those who follow Christ, looks something like this. During World War II, Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes served as Portugal's consul general in France. He was a very wealthy man. The Mendes family, which consisted of Aristides, his wife, and fourteen children, lived in a fine mansion. All the children received a

good education and instruction in music. Because Portugal remained neutral during the war, Mendes' job could have been relatively comfortable. But as the Nazis advanced across Europe, Jewish refugees from Holland, Belgium, and France began converging on Portugal's consulate, begging for travel visas that would allow them to escape. The Portuguese government officially forbade Mendes from issuing visas to the refugees, even though their lives were in jeopardy. But one day, a refugee rabbi and his family confronted Mendes. Mendes was willing to offer them help, but they reminded him that thousands more Jews were in danger. After his conversation with the rabbi, Mendes retreated to his bedroom, where he lay in bed for three days and nights. During this time, he refused to eat or to talk with his family.

When he emerged from his bedroom, Mendes claimed that he had heard God telling him what to do. He began writing exit visas by the hundreds, then by the thousands, offering them to the refugees who crowded his residence day and night. By month's end, Aristides de Sousa Mendes had written some ten thousand exit visas. The Portuguese government ordered him to return home. He was dismissed from his job, sued by his government. Over the next few years, the Mendes family lost their fortune and became destitute. By the early 1950s, they were being fed at a public soup kitchen in Lisbon run by the local Jewish community. Aristides de Sousa Mendes heard the call to discipleship, took up a cross and did what he had to do.

There is a dividing line in life. We are recipients of God's amazing, abundant, luxuriant grace. But it is not a cheap grace. Christ laid down his own life to obtain it for us. We in turn, are called to live lives that honor that sacrifice. We are to live responsible, accountable lives that bring honor to Christ. If that means we sacrifice many things that are dear to us, so be it. That is what Christ did on our behalf.

Amen.