

Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018
Fr Jonathan Jong

Isaiah 50.5-9a

James 2.14-18

Mark 8.27-35

There was a poll published last week, reporting that among 18-24 year olds, only 2% identified themselves with the Church of England; 70% declared themselves non-religious.¹ Somewhat surprisingly, given this level of secularity, other recent polls have found that somewhere between 9% to 18% of the young British public still believe that Jesus is the Son of God; looking across all age groups, that number is closer to 30%.²

Regrettably, I don't have data on what proportion of this country believes that Jesus is "the Christ"—as opposed to being John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets—so I cannot say how we fare against St Peter. My guess is that we would have done alright, though this is not very impressive, considering that we have enjoyed 2,000 years of Christianity: the clue is in

¹ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2018/september/church-of-england-numbers-at-record-low>

² Three different YouGov polls from 2013 and 2015.

the name. Most people would probably be able to identify Jesus as the Christ, though they might have no idea what that means.

In not knowing what it means to say that Jesus is the Christ, the British population is in good company: they are in St Peter's company, the rock upon whom this Christ built his Church. He too is able to say the words, "You are the Christ", but his understanding of this turns out to be satanic, as our theologies can so often do. God knows what Peter imagined a Messiah to be. A conquerer, perhaps, the leader of a populist revolt against their imperial masters. He would not have been the only one to make this assumption. Nor would it have been a silly assumption to make, given the circumstances.

It is, in any case, no more silly than the mistakes we make, two thousand years of theologising later. We still think of God as a cold parent, stingy with affection and not easily impressed. Or as a voyeuristic tyrant, prurient and punishing. Or as a sage on a mountain, too distant and respectable to be sullied by the messes we have made of our personal relationships and politics. "You are the Christ" we know well enough to say on a Sunday morning, but still we forget that he is

the God born out of wedlock, born under oppression;
the homeless itinerant God who ends up dead,
marginalised and mocked, betrayed and beaten.

And it is not only Jesus's identity that Peter gets wrong, but his own as well. Or rather, not only does Peter fail to understand what it means to believe that *Jesus is the Christ*: he also fails to understand what it means to *believe* that Jesus is the Christ. Having bid Peter keep silence, and then corrected his Christology, Jesus turns to tell his disciples what it means to believe in him: "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Or, as St James puts it: faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

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St James is not the world's most precise writer of the New Testament, which is probably what lands him in trouble with Martin Luther, who calls this letter "an

epistle of straw”³ and accuses its author of mangling the Scriptures⁴. Fighting words.

The point of contention is the cause of our justification: is it faith or is it works? Luther, citing St Paul, is very clear that it is faith and faith alone. St James, later on in this epistle, says equally clearly that we are justified by works, and *not* by faith alone. There is an obvious contradiction.

And yet, Luther himself provides the means of reconciliation. Faith, he writes in his preface introducing the Letter to the Romans, “is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God [...] is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith: it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire”.

Or, as St James puts: faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

It, in fact, is no faith at all, but what Luther calls “the human notion and dream that some people call faith”,

³ *Preface to the New Testament*

⁴ *Preface to St James and St Jude*

which he says is what happens when someone hears the gospel, decides that it is true, and says, “I believe”, much as we might do when we recite the Creed.

And what’s wrong with that? Nothing. To the contrary, it is important to believe the claims of the gospel, to have confidence in the truth as we have received it. But that’s not faith.

Rather, faith is the thing that makes believing possible, and good works too: it is not something of our own deciding or doing, but in Luther’s words, “a divine work”, a gift of God that, in our receiving it, transforms us, “makes us to be born anew”⁵.

It is this faith—this act of God—that Luther rightly insists justifies us: St James and St Paul would agree, and none of them would see inherent salvific value in the human act of believing itself, except as a response to the faith that has been given. And if this believing is a genuine response to faith—if it is not merely an ersatz faith, a faith so called—then it will bear fruit.

The analogy St James draws is instructive and well chosen. To those of us who want to know what works

⁵ *Preface to St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*

follow from true faith, St James reminds us that there are people who are cold and hungry. Faith without works, he says, is like wishing that the homeless guy outside Tesco across the street gets fed and clothed, without doing anything to improve his chances of obtaining food and shelter. Or, in more modern terms, it is like advertising our “thoughts and prayers” on social media after a disaster without sending money or supplies to the people who need it, letters and phone calls to people in power.

The analogy is well chosen because it is clearly reminiscent of Jesus’s own ministry, whom we are called to follow. Deny yourselves, he says, take up your cross and follow me. And—if his own life is any indication, which it must be—what Jesus means by this is not primarily abstinence and austerity.

No, Christian self-denial and sacrifice is outward looking, it is first and always for others. The self we are called to deny is the self that takes comfort in the riches we have hoarded and the conveniences we have paid for, including the convenience of wilful ignorance of the plight of the poor. The cross we are called to take up is the cost of the sacrifices required to feed a hungry world, to save it, not least from ourselves, in

our participation in the economic and political structures that perpetuate it. When Jesus criticises the rich, it is not because they enjoy life, but because they are trapped by their riches, insulated from the world with whom we are all called to share our riches and inured to the injustices we daily commit against them.

This sacrificial self-denial for the sake of others is not an optional extra to the fundamentals of Christian faith: it is simply part of what it means to believe in Jesus, what it means to confess that he is the Christ. This is true for all Christians, but is surely a lesson that we have literally imbibed, those of us whose Christian practice revolves around the celebration of the eucharist, in which we are joined with Christ and with him offered as living sacrifices for God's work in the world.

Therefore, let us stand up together, and remember what we stand for: and as we affirm once again our faith in almighty God who has given us the most precious of gifts, let us hear clearly our calling to live lives of giving, which is our true expression of faith.

