



# SAINT LUKE'S

## “NOT KNOWING”

PROPER 19B

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

PSALM 116

JAMES 3:1-12

MARK 8:27-38

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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In today's gospel, Jesus is dealing with something that can trip any of us up. What we don't know that we don't know can lead us into trouble. *You are the Messiah*, says Peter. Yet it becomes painfully clear that Peter doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows about Jesus the Messiah.

To be fair to Peter, he has been taught by his Hebrew tradition that "Messiah" includes triumph, popularity, political success. The idea that shame and death is the Messiah's earthly destiny is blasphemous to Peter. There are certainly texts about the Messiah as a Suffering Servant<sup>1</sup>; about One who endures unjust suffering, willing sacrifice; One who takes the place of the victim; the Servant who offers himself as a substitute and scapegoat. These understandings of Messiah are found within the Hebrew Scriptures, but they are not dominant. Peter is an enthusiast for new ideas, but even Peter cannot stomach Jesus' revision of what it means to be anointed by God.

Humanly speaking, Jesus could have let the limits of Peter's vision change him. (After all, what kind of leader are you if no-one is following you? If even your closest follower is so far from understanding your message?). Instead, Jesus remains true to himself, in spite of misunderstanding and growing opposition.

The farming family I grew up in in England taught me something for which I have always been grateful. My mother's ancestry is Scottish and when her ancestors migrated from Scotland to England in the 1880s, they were outsiders with Scottish accents, customs and clothing, and not surprisingly were not particularly welcomed in south east England.

<sup>1</sup> especially in Isaiah: Is. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.

Marginalized folks tend to stick together for security. Families and family loyalty are most important; the opinion of others, less so. Farming families, often many generations on the same land, have a way of life that is so anchored that we didn't seek the usual markers of societal approval. We never looked on with envy at the latest gadget or must-have. We were who we were and that was OK with us. Jesus offers us a *spiritual* groundedness and steadiness that comes from knowing who we are and what matters most. This gift of God comes to us because we follow a Messiah who knows who *he* is and is immune to popularity polls.

*Who do you say that I am?* Jesus accepts the title Messiah from Peter's lips. Jesus describes himself as Son of Man. Son of Man is Jesus' most frequent description of himself. The Son of Man appears in Hebrew tradition chiefly in two ways. One is at the end of time<sup>2</sup> as a bridge between us and God. The Son of Man is also our representative, the archetypal human for all of us. Jesus as Son of Man goes deliberately to the margins, to those who are suffering, and stands with them. Jesus is always walking towards the Cross during his time on earth and when he accepts the designation of Messiah that is how Jesus defines what Messiah means. Not earthly triumph but willing defeat. This is our path too. Death always comes before Resurrection. By definition, there is no Resurrection without a death first. Offering our life for others is our calling too, so that God can give our life back to us transformed, made new, with a new vision for our lives.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ezek. 2:1,3; 3:1; Dan. 7:13-14; 8:17; "son of man" is sometimes translated "mortal" (so NRSV); Mt. 8:20; 9:6; 13:41; 16:13; 20:28; Mk 2:10-11; Lk. 5: 24; 22:69; Acts 7:56 ; Rev. 1:13; 14:14

When Jesus as Messiah points first to the Cross before he points to glory, this is a great gift to us. Jesus' acceptance of suffering and shame helps us cope with daily life. Jesus is not afraid of shame or public diminishment or what we would call failure. We can choose to live through shame and failure knowing that it does not define who we really are, because God is not defeated by it, and who we are is rooted in God.

We live in a culture where there is no mercy. We delight in setting up celebrities and then trashing them ferociously. Praising then tearing down. We find old media posts and use them to savage people. All as though we had never ourselves fallen short or sinned or said something we later regretted. In a strange paradox, this death-denying, age-denying culture is also profoundly violent – guns, high incarceration, fighting wars abroad, and barricading ourselves in at home, closing our borders; striking out at those who are defenseless. This is where Jesus goes – the Son of Man – taking up his Cross, enduring abuse and standing with the abused, yet walking forward undefeated, knowing it will not always be this way. One day, all will be made new. Meanwhile, on the road, Jesus scatters mercy and forgiveness wherever he goes. He sows words and actions of kindness, healing and absolution. Not only is Jesus unbowed and undiminished, Jesus doesn't diminish others either. Jesus raises up others as a way of being.

We avoid shame and death at all costs. Consider Jesus' offering of something quite different. We are all walking towards the Cross daily,

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 11:1-9

whether kicking and screaming or with eyes wide open. We are all dying day by day. New life comes as we choose to lay down the old gods, the old untruths of “I can conquer, I can master, I am stronger, smarter, faster (than)...” We can embrace that we are all imperfect, and (so un-American) have our weaknesses, our limitations. God can do something with that; there is room to receive help from God when we face our vulnerability and our past hurts and shame. Whatever for you that causes that profound feeling of inadequacy – we all have something deep down that causes that. It is safe to unbury that and expose it to resurrection. We can choose a different way of living. We can forgive and be forgiven. We don’t have to settle for shallow relationships built on transaction - what I can get from you and what you can get from me in return – we can choose relationship that assumes others are valuable, loveable, worthy of respect and worthy of every dignity, courtesy and kindness we can offer because our Lord is merciful and kind.

Finally, we can learn from Peter that we need not be afraid of not knowing. Questions are good. Not knowing something means there is room for more – more understanding, more love, changing our minds, more information, revised opinions, deeper truth, more love. What Peter could have said, which is closer to the truth for all of us, is *You are the Messiah...* and we need your help, Lord Jesus, understanding what that means, for your life and for ours.

AMEN





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