

2020-08-23 Ali cooper

Trinity 11: Matthew 16: 13-20

For those of us who are fortunate enough to enjoy a holiday, once or maybe even a couple of times annually, it's probably something of an understatement to say that many plans may have been foiled this year! As indeed they have been in our household. As a family, we usually decamp to France for some weeks, but thought twice about it this summer. Instead my husband and I found ourselves exploring a little more of the English countryside and coastline - a few days in Suffolk (empty beaches and peaceful villages!), a couple of days discovering the astonishing history of Bury St. Edmunds, some sunny days on the Isle of Wight - our version of a staycation cruise! And a week in north Norfolk still to come.

Lucky us, very lucky as there is much angst and upheaval in the world around us as a result of this virus, so much loss and heartache everywhere, and it doesn't seem to be going away any time soon.

To have been able to enjoy such natural beauty offered by our small island, has been a delight for us and we do indeed appreciate how fortunate we are, because for so many that would just be a distant dream, an impossible luxury. In Crockham Hill, that beauty pervades all around us, as Mother Earth continues wonderfully defiant and profuse.

But the spring and summer glories of the past few months stand in stark contrast to the crushing control that Covid is wreaking on thousands of lives. It seems as if we no longer hold sway over 'life' - travel, education, health, family life, work, our communal worship. And it makes me wonder if we ever really did, or was that just an illusion?

So, where are these musings leading? As ever and always to the gospel reading offered to us today, in which we hear Jesus asking two questions of his disciples - 'who do *people* say that I am; and who do *you* say that I am?'

Jesus wants to know what people are saying about him and rather poignantly I feel, wants to know the same of his disciples, his friends.

Who do we/I say that Jesus is? As Christians, it is for us to explore our personal response, who Jesus is for us, how he has woven into our lives and experiences. Of himself, Jesus would say that he and God are one and it is Peter who brings this to a wonderful height in his proclamation that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah, sent by God!

At that moment of revelation, the disciples may have thought that the future was predictable. Their Saviour, who would set them free from oppression, was at last amongst them, gathering them around him, and surely about to conquer their little corner of the world. But you see, as we have discovered particularly of late, expectations, hopes and dreams, anticipations, can sometimes be like dandelion seeds blowing in the wind, moving

at the whim of the breeze away from our grasp. Indeed 'the best laid plans of mice and men do (without doubt) often go awry'!

Jesus hadn't come to take control as they were to discover. A Messiah, yes, but one who is much more concerned with healing the pains and struggles of the poor in body, mind and spirit, than he was in political manoeuvring and religious status. I would imagine that it must have been hard for the disciples to deal with this confusion, even disappointment, dismay and, at times, fear.

All this holds a mirror up to where we are as a people today. Confused, frustrated, perhaps fearful of an uncertain future. This wasn't what we expected or anticipated or planned for our lives. And that has always been so, when our state of affairs suddenly changes, when life throws us a curved ball. But out of this disruption, love and compassion have taken wings; blessings have been counted; small things appreciated in new and unexpected ways.

And what are we expecting from Jesus in all this? Who are we wanting, needing him to be for us right now and in the days and months ahead? Who is he for you - the light and the truth that gives purpose and makes sense of life itself? Could it be that you feel he is your brother, your healer, your guide, your hope, your companion? Or are we simply lost in the mystery of his identity?

These questions can really only be answered in truth by each one of us in our own hearts, how our own needs and longings are met and comforted. And today, as I leave you with these thoughts to ponder on, there are perhaps more questions than answers; because that surely is the nature of a living faith, yes, encouraged and upheld by who others have discovered Jesus to be, but ultimately needing to walk that path through our own experiences towards our moment of revelation.

The disciples had to walk this path as far as the death of their beloved Lord before they understood fully, and knew him then as the risen Christ whose Spirit would energise and inspire them, light of the world and love incarnate.

During these times, however life is panning out for you, whatever new place you find yourself to be in, may this same Christ be at your side, the presence of love and assurance, the light of your world and the peace of your days.

Amen.