

Sunday, September 16, 2018

17th Sunday after Pentecost

The Readings on This Day

Isaiah 50:4-9a

This passage from Isaiah is appointed each year on Passion/Palm Sunday. Today it serves especially to provide metaphoric background for the New Testament descriptions of Christ's crucifixion. We are called to stand with Jesus no matter what conflicts we encounter, for we will receive God's help.

James 3:1-12

In a culture that sanctifies personal speech and regularizes satire and other types of verbal abuse, James's poignant reminder of the dangers of speaking one's own mind is timely. James relies on the Genesis 1 description of humans as created in the likeness of God to call the faithful to lives of blessing, rather than cursing.

Mark 8:27-38

We gather with Jesus' disciples to acclaim Jesus as the one God has anointed to save us, yet we too often prefer a human interpretation to the divine one. Many contemporary exegetes urge care that the first-century call in the face of persecution to take up one's cross ought not degenerate into the advice to seek martyrdom or to be acquiescent to conditions of misery. Rather, Christians are invited to live with countercultural values. Christians are set in the end time, the beginning of the conclusion of human suffering and injustice, which is seen first in the resurrection of Jesus.

An Unexpected Kind of Messiah

Today we hear from three teachers. The prophet Isaiah calls himself a teacher, one whose words sustain weary people. James warns about foolish and hurtful use of our tongues, which should be used to "bless the Lord and Father," but often are used to "curse those who are made in the likeness of God." The final voice in the trio is Jesus, the teacher, who keeps the disciples quiet about any Messiah identity but speaks openly about his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter tries to counsel Jesus that no one willingly chooses to go along with that kind of plan. Nobody likes a loser. But Jesus responds that Peter has lost sight of what is most important in life. Jesus teaches the disciples that they will lose their life for the sake of the gospel.

How does the Holy Spirit move in, through, before, and after worship to sustain weary people with the word and sacraments? How can we make spaces for silence, art, and song so that people living through suffering and facing death can breathe, see, and hear God's presence with them? In what ways do we make the same mistake as the disciples did, expecting a Messiah but then setting our visions on human rather than on divine things?

Jesus invites people of faith and those who doubt Jesus' way to engage rather than avoid, conquer, or escape. What practices will help worshipers today to imagine the ways they are being called to "lose" their life in order to save it? From what does Jesus want to free people so that they will be able to pick up a different kind of burden and follow him? Then and now, Jesus invites followers on the way of the cross—a path of daily learning, dying, and new life.

PRAYERS OF THE DAY

Let us pray.

O God, through suffering and rejection you bring forth our salvation, and by the glory of the cross you transform our lives. Grant that for the sake of the gospel we may turn from the lure of evil, take up our cross, and follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of earth and air, water and fire, height and depth, bless those who work in the danger of hurricane Florence, who rush into bring hope and help and comfort when others must flee to safety, whose mission is to seek and save, serve and protect, help and heal, and whose presence embodies the protection of the Good Shepherd. Give them caution and concern for one another, so that in safety they may do what must be done, under your holy and watchful eye. Support them in their courage and dedication that they may continue to save lives, ease pain, and mend the torn fabric of lives and social order; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Merciful God, when the storms rage and threaten to overtake us, awaken our faith to know the power of your peace. Deliver us from our fear and ease our anxiety. Help us to endure the time of uncertainty and give us strength to face the challenges ahead. Give us the assurance of your presence even in this time so that we can cling to your promise of hope and life shown to us through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Lord in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Into your wide embrace, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your boundless mercy through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

Amen.