Sermon by the Right Rev’d John R. Stephens

Holy Cross Church, Vancouver September 12, 2021

Proper 24, Year B

It is a delight for me to be here at Holy Cross Parish this morning. To worship in person and to share time with other people feels like such a gift right now. The separation induced by the pandemic has affected so many of us as we struggle with all sorts of things including loneliness and worry and fear and concern and questions about priorities and the future itself. As the protocols related to COVID have started to loosen it has been a breath of fresh air for many (but not all) helping to bring new perspective on what is most important in life. As a community of faith in Jesus Christ, I know that this time of social isolation has affected you as a parish.

But at the same time some wonderful things have taken place here at Holy Cross over the last 19 months or so. I know that it was so difficult for you when Lucy moved away from Vancouver and hence away from the parish but there has been much to celebrate as well. Alecia has come to you and brought an incredible skill set and lots of energy and a commitment to the gospel that will guide and shape this parish in beautiful new ways. I have known Alecia for a few years and I know that you have already discovered what I know about her gifts, capabilities and infectious inclusion. That in itself would be fantastic. But I also heard about the Summer of Clean with a huge amount of work done in painting and tidying and rethinking. Two weeks ago the wedding of Atsumi and Justin brought great joy to so many. I know that not everyone who wanted to attend were able to do that and there is sadness in this, but great joy that the wedding went ahead, that love took precedence over the pandemic, that a new future was allowed to have a voice. These are all wonderful things taking place at Holy Cross. And now here we are this morning. We have much to celebrate and for which we give thanks.

So with this in mind, let me pick up the gospel passage for today. Jesus and his disciples are making their way to Caesarea Philippi. In my mind’s eye, and it is not laid out this way in the Bible, but in my mind’s eye, they are walking and it is a warm day. They talk about the usual things people talk about at the start of a day and the start of a pilgrimage. They talk about the weather, they talk about people they know, they talk about politics, they talk about money market funds, they talk about humorous encounters they have had. They talk about all these things and others besides. But suddenly there is a change… like a change in the wind, or a change in the mood or a change in the temperature. The conversation moves from light and airy to something deeper and more central. It moves from chit-chat to purpose and meaning. It moves from did I tell you what my four your old daughter said the other day, to the presence of God being heard and known. It moves from the mundane to considering what is most important and central to life. And perhaps the disciples almost get whiplash in the process.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked them. And we could approach this as if assuming that Jesus is asking them to find his ID like at the airport and showing his passport. But that is not at all what he is asking and they know it. And it intimidates them. “Who do you say that I am?” he changes the question just in case there is any mistake. “Who do you say that I am?” Not looking for their research and clarification of his parents but “Who do you say that I am” in the sense of because of me how do you now understand the presence and wonder of God. Because of me, Jesus was asking, how do you now view the world? Because of me, Jesus was asking, how do you walk on this planet?

It is comfortable to sit back and observe this conversation with Jesus and his followers of long ago and almost laugh at them in their timidness and almost silly answers. It is easy for us now to think that they seemed to have missed all that was going on all around them even though they walked with Jesus every day. It is easy for us now to think we would have answered clearly and forthrightly and determinedly along with Peter, “You are the Messiah.” But I wonder if we really would have done so.

You see affirming that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour, the hope, the grace, the word, the wisdom of God is one thing. Acknowledging that we believe that he is the Christ is but the start and it is not the end. For we are baptized into this. With the sign of the cross made by the waters of Baptism on our foreheads with the words spoken, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit said over us and for us… this is but the beginning. It is the start of what it means to be a follower of this Jesus of Nazareth. It is what takes place on our pilgrimage after these words are spoken that reveals the depth and meaning and purpose of our calling and our faith.

Jesus calls together the crowd and he says essentially this to them: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And a bit later he said, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

This is where the rubber hits the road, if you will. It is not enough to believe in God. It is not enough to affirm that there is a Holy Spirit. It is not enough to think that prayer is a good idea for other people. It is not enough to affirm that we believe in the love of God if it does not then transform and change us. If it does not have us scurrying to understand the depth and breadth and height of that love and what it is calling us to be and do. Our faith is not about sitting on this stunning knowledge that the son of God came into our world and asked us directly and clearly, Who do you say that I am. And our answer is not to be some vague, metaphor filled, theological textbook kind of response. Our response is about how we live and walk in this world knowing that God is amongst us. This is the gaining of our lives part that Jesus was referring to. It is this relationship with God that is the anchor and purpose and meaning of life.

The book of Proverbs described it in this way: “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: How long O simple ones, will you love being simple?” The wisdom of God is so often lost on us for we get so busy trying to define the messiah that we miss recognizing the presence of the messiah.

In the letter of James we heard the description of how we might consider how to tame the tongue, how we might no longer utter both blessings and curses but instead seek God’s purpose, God’s hope, God’s grace.

Jesus was asking of his followers not just to memorize the words but to take up our cross and follow. Become doers of the word and not merely ones who nod in acquiescence.

On September 1st we began the season of Creation in the church. A time set aside to contemplate the beauty of this world but not just to stop there. A time to recognize the wonder and amazement of this planet but not just to stop there. A time to give thanks for the trees, the mountains, the burrow, the nest, the waters, the rains but not just to stop there. But to acknowledge that by our baptism into Jesus’ life, death and resurrection we are called into a renewed relationship with the world, one where we are called to care and to respond to the world that we continue to destroy. To awaken ourselves to living out our faith in a God who calls us to action and not simply quietly nodding.

In recent times in this province the results of the abuses at Residential Schools continue to surface. The destruction and harm that they have caused has lasted many generations and the healing needs to go far beyond simply affirming a desire for change but involves action and purpose; revealing our respect for the dignity of every human being because of our baptism calls us to go further.

There are many aspects to this life that need more than our thoughts, they need our prayers; prayers of words and prayers of actions. Refugees in this world who are desperate for concern and new hope. The country of Afghanistan has been essentially destroyed by our commitment to war. The need for housing, for true homes, for an end to homelessness is desperately needed in in the Lower Mainland and throughout our country. The number of people who have died as a result of drug overdoses while so many of us sit idly by continues to be of great concern. You know the list of concerns I do not need to expand on others.

I began this sermon by noting that for many people the pandemic has urged us to reconsider our priorities, our purpose, our desires. May we not lose sight of this wisdom that still cries out in our streets as we consider Jesus’ question of long ago that still echoes through our universe. “Who do you say that I am?” And perhaps in our contemplations, we come to see that Jesus is also asking who do people say that we are as result of knowing this Jesus as the Messiah, as a result of our baptism. May our actions shout our response.