

Sunday 30 October 2022 – Zoom Reflection

Defining Who We are

Gospel: Luke 9. 18-27

Later this week, I am going to leave paid employment. That is a phrase that I use as an alternative to the word 'retirement'. To say that you are retiring, creates a vision of pipe and slippers, a comfy chair, leisure time to read the paper and watch daytime television. That may be the way some retired people spend their time and for some that is the right thing, particularly more elderly people. But, at the moment, that is not for me. I am going to spend more time attending to church matters and be one of those people who say: *honestly, I don't know how I had time to work before.*

The one thing that I am slightly worried about is: how will I be defined as a retired person? For the past 50 years (yes, it is that long) I have been able to answer the question *who are you?* by saying *Oh, I'm a hospital porter*, or *I'm a business journalist* or *I work for an international health charity*, and I can go on to explain my job in more detail, as if my job is who I am. Now that I'm about to give up my job, I'm going to have to find a different way of explaining the person that I am.

I can take a lead from this morning's gospel, where Jesus almost has a conversation like that when he starts a discussion with his disciples by asking them: *who do the people say I am?* He gets a number of answers, so he presses the disciples by asking *but who do **you** say who I am?* Peter gets it right (unusual for him) by saying that Jesus is God's Messiah.

But, like saying that I'm a Lay Leader of Worship at two churches in Hertford, it's not much more than a label, because it gives no detail and leaves much to the imagination of the listener.

Luckily, the second part of the gospel goes on to explain how following God's Messiah should define believers. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily', he says.

This is a message that runs counter to modern culture, where everyone is encouraged to put themselves first.

According to preacher Mike Cain from Emmanuel Bristol, who I heard speak recently, in the year 2000, a survey in the UK revealed that, when people were asked what was better for society, putting the needs of others first or looking after yourself, the majority answered: 'putting others first'. By 2006, the same

survey revealed a complete reversal of that philosophy. People thought that their right to be true to themselves and attend to their own material needs first made communities stronger.

I'm sure that that kind of thinking has continued to grow, with the increasing need that people feel to define themselves on social media in terms of what they wear, where they eat, the parties they go to, the holidays they buy, the cars they drive, the houses they live in.

This is completely confounded by Christ in today's reading. *What does it profit you if you gain the whole world? Deny yourselves, he says, take up your cross daily and follow me.*

Taking up your cross daily means reaching out to others first; being grateful, being cheerful, not moaning or complaining, not subconsciously scoring points against other people by cataloguing what you buy, what you own, where you go, who you mix with.

We shouldn't be defined by the job we do or by our health problems or our standard of living or the house we live in, but by our humility and by the generosity we show to the people we know and by loving the strangers that we meet. In other words, we should be defined by being a Christian.

It's a tough call, of course, to do this every day and sometimes I stop and ask myself, are my words and actions from Monday to Saturday in accord with my words of praise and worship on Sunday? I hope so, but I'm going to make an effort this week, as I step away from my career, to find new ways to define myself so that, on a good day, people might say *Oh, that man must be a Christian.*

Amen