

“You are the Christ! . . . Yikes!”

Rev. Jennifer Adams, September 13, 2009 – Proper 19B

Well have the perfect gospel reading for kick-off Sunday. Because this passage is also a kick-off of sorts, a beginning in its own right. Mark chapter 8, verse 29 contains what we refer to as “The Confession of St Peter” and it’s a big deal because it’s the first time in this gospel that anybody called Jesus the Messiah; it’s also one of Peter’s most shining moments in the whole of the gospel story. So it’s a turning point for Peter – we could say that it’s his kick-off into leadership, that moment in which he took a risk and shouted out his faith and put a name on his belief in response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” Now since it’s the gospel of Mark which always keeps things moving pretty quickly there isn’t any time for celebration around this kick-off, no pictures, no picnic, no kickball, no anything really. Jesus simply heard Peter’s response and then reminded the disciples to keep their heads down and keep moving forward.

But then He himself, Jesus added to this air of beginnings by offering his first prediction of the passion. Immediately after Peter proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, Jesus went on to tell the disciples for the first time that he must undergo great suffering, that he must be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, be killed and after three days rise again. Which led to a less than bright moment for Peter but produced a very clear message about where Jesus was headed and what that road ahead would like for him anyone who chose to follow him. From this point on, to follow would mean the loss of life and the gaining of new life. To follow would require everyone to take up their cross.

And so what an amazing passage this is for us to consider on Kick-Off Sunday, as we celebrate the start up of Forums and Sunday School classes and youth groups and choirs and a whole lot of other wonderful things including this year’s strategic planning process which you’ve all been invited to participate in this week . . . as we re-begin these program and vision dimensions of parish life, the gospel just gave us two important pieces to carry with us, to shape us, even as we give shape to our year and the years to come.

First is the reminder that what we do in this place and how we do it is our answer to the question Jesus has asked us, “So, Grace Church, who do YOU say that I am?” That question is in the air all the time here, and Jesus made it clear in this passage that he doesn’t just want to hear what we think others have to say. He wants to hear from us. So, Like Peter, this is a our chance to step out a bit to be bold with the proclamation that is ours. The challenge is that Episcopalians tend to whisper their responses to this question. “Who you say that I am?” . . . “Well, you are the Christ,” we say, “the Messiah. . . the Saviour, depending I guess on what you mean by that. . .and certainly not meaning what some others mean by that, but also not wanting to offend anyone by what we mean by that.” But actually we should approach this question as a good opportunity for a short and uncharacteristically loud response. “You are the Christ!” we say. (Which doesn’t mean that we have it all figured out it just means that we have something to say.) And then we give that answer flesh by the things that we do and the ways we do them and we might as well put that out there too. Because you are the Christ, we give thanks in song and prayer! We feed all who come! We do our best to care for each other! We challenge ourselves to keep learning and growing in faith! Kick-off Sunday and strategic planning time is our chance to step forward

and burst like Peter did, an opportunity to let Grace overflow. As the program year begins and as this question lingers in the air, shout a bit about what's going on here about how we proclaim the good news that is Christ.

But as we do that we also hold the second piece of this gospel story deep in our hearts; that second piece of the gospel passage which was Jesus' teaching that such beginnings are related to our endings which are forever tied to resurrection-like new beginnings. And in case that felt like a little much for one sentence, here's what I mean: anytime we move forward, if we really do our moving in faith we'll have our crosses with us, close at hand, close at heart. Which means that if we're doing this right we'll not only grow this year, we'll die this year, we'll die to something this year. If we're on track we'll not only celebrate as we move forward, we'll suffer for the sake of something larger than ourselves. If we're following Christ, we'll not only proclaim his identity, we'll embrace our truths too, crosses and resurrections included. And all of that means that as we program and as we strategically plan it will be important to remember that it's not by our own power, our own vision alone that we move ahead. Sometimes our greatest leaps will happen because we embrace our powerlessness and our unknowing and we let God move us where God would have us be.

And so when I really put all of this together and I acknowledged what it is that we are really kicking-off today, I realized that I should probably check in with all of you and make sure you're still in. Are you sure you want to do this? Are you sure you want to have a picnic (probably OK with that) but how about risking life as we know it? Are you sure you want to set goals and work to grow our resources (OK?), but how about then using a hunk of those resources to feed people whose hungers run deeper than we can even imagine? Still up for it? One more. Are you sure you want to welcome everyone in the name of Christ, because of Christ? Even though each one of those everyone's will not only strengthen us they'll change us and challenge us too?

OK. Let's go. I think we have the right mix of proclamation, confidence and fear and trembling to kick-off with the whole of the gospel in our hearts. Today we move forward, crosses on our backs, resurrection on the horizon and Christ, the Messiah here with us too . Amen.