**SERMON TRINITY 15 2021**

Today we are starting a new series of Sunday sermons looking at the essential teachings of Jesus and are rightly beginning by asking who Jesus was and suggesting the answer is ‘The Messiah’. So I want to begin by asking you to put your hand up if you are a Messiah. Not many of us think that of ourselves. Please put your hand up if you have been baptised. Most, if not all of us. It is likely that during your baptism service you were anointed with chrism, consecrated oil, and the sign of the cross was made on your forehead. I guess, like me, your memory of your baptism is a bit hazy but if that happened you could call yourself a Messiah.

My point is that the Hebrew word anglicised into Messiah means ‘Anointed by God’ so if you were signed during your baptism or at any other time you are a Messiah. But you are not The Messiah – that title has already been taken. As an aside, the word Christ from which is derived Christening, means the same as Messiah; it comes from the Greek word rather than the Hebrew one. So, when we speak of Jesus as being Jesus Christ we mean that he is Jesus who is the Christ, the person anointed by God. Jesus knew what Messiah meant and his disciples and the people around him knew what they meant so I think it will be helpful if we look at how the title came into use and why Jesus proved by his actions and teaching that he was worthy to be called Messiah – The Messiah - and how that should affect us today.

I want to step back from the specific to the general and look at the long perspective. Our world and the universe in which it exists is a Godly creation. Whether you think evolution is the way humans came into existence or not, any realistic view of the spiritual development of humanity over the millennia would recognise that we, the human race, have been on a journey physically, materially and spiritually. The Christian belief is that God has been at work since the beginning of consciousness. There are some big philosophical issues about why God, though he had the power did not decide that humanity should completely conform to his nature of love and forgiveness but gave us the choice of accepting and following or not. God chose to limit his power so that we, his people, could come willingly and faithfully to know him and conform to his will. We are intrinsically sinful and need divine help to move in the right direction.

The OT witness is that from the moment humans became conscious of the otherness of God, God has never stopped trying to bring us closer to him. We need teachers, role models, prophets to help us. We need Messiahs. In the OT the term Messiah could be attached to anyone invested with power by God. Priests who were anointed using consecrated oil to their sacred roles would be called Messiah. As the Exodus happened, as the Jews left Egypt and Moses brought the 10 Commandments from Mt Sinai appropriate housing was needed for the tablets. The Levites in the desert were anointed and were chosen by God for their particular job of looking after the Holy of Holies and teaching the people how to worship Yahweh; they were Messiahs. Kings were anointed - remember Samuel anointing Saul as the first King of Israel and the prophet Nathan did the same for David. All these were called Messiah. That practise continued. Our present Queen was anointed in her Coronation ceremony and could be called a Messiah. Even pagans, Gentiles could be anointed like King Cyrus, a Babylonian was called God’s anointed because he did God’s will. So the description of someone as a Messiah was well established before Jesus came on the scene. Jesus by his birth, life, death resurrection and ascension, showed that he was the one unique person worthy of the title The Messiah.

What should The Messiah be like? If we look at the OT prophets, we can see a vision of the nature of The Messiah. Isaiah 9 has the well known description of The Messiah, the anointed one, as being Wonderful Counsellor – one who carries out a programme of action, Mighty God – the one who will, by his power and authority bring God’s nature and will to the people, Everlasting Father – someone showing the best characteristics of an earthly father by protecting and enabling his children, and Prince of Peace, Prince of Shalom, the one who will bring fullness and wholeness to his people. The interpretation I’ve put on these titles are, I hope, close to what Isaiah meant but the titles are also capable of a much more human, dominant and military interpretation and people tried to push Jesus into that role.

Jesus the Christ knew, I believe, who he was and what his life’s objectives were. It’s worth reflecting how he achieved this.

It’s clear from the Gospel accounts that among the population there was a hearty dislike, to put it mildly, for the occupation of Judea by the Roman army with all the suffering and hardship that brought. Several revolutions had been brutally put down by the Roman army but there was still the hope and expectation that God, Yahweh, would appoint someone who could lead the Jews out of their slavery to a new promised land where they would be top dog, God would be in charge and everything would be perfect. Sounds positively Talibanish to me. So there was very fertile ground for a new Messiah to be found. The big problem was that Jesus was The Messiah but his, and God’s, vision of his mission were very different from those of the general population. How could Jesus persuade people who he was and what God’s plans were?

The Gospels tell us that he used a multifaceted approach. He had a very attractive personality and was very accepting of all types, genders, and nationalities of the people he met. People liked him. His teaching was pitched at the level that people could understand and it related to what they knew was happening in their own everyday lives. The stories he told made them laugh and cry; made them question their own behaviour and see what they did in a new light. They encouraged his listeners to change the way they lived. Great though this was it was not enough to give Jesus the profile, the public standing that he needed to make a serious impression and have people pay attention. He needed to be the equivalent of a modern pop star without its current downside. He had a great love of people and cared when they were suffering the many untreatable diseases that were common. So he used his Father’s power over nature to heal people. The Gospels tell us that he drew big crowds for his teaching but maybe the healing work he did was the initial magnet that encouraged people to come and listen and be changed. When asked to justify his teaching and actions he said believe the words, or if that’s not enough believe my actions. He became their Messiah – recognised as The Messiah by his close followers as today’s Gospel reading tells us and by many others who were captivated by him.

His final conflict with Jewish and Roman authority was entirely of his making and his resurrection was the tool that sealed his status as The Messiah. And if anyone wants proof, the Epistle reading gives an excellent summary of his life and work but for proof positive, direct them here. The fact that his church exists with billions of followers is proof positive that he is the Messiah.

How should this affect us? I hope the fact that you are here means that you have some relationship of belief and trust with Jesus the Christ and with God Almighty. Build that relationship; read the Bible and absorb the truth that is there, talk about where you are in your faith journey to others in a group or with a friend, question what you say and do - your decisions – and measure them against the love that Jesus showed in his life and, just like Peter in our Gospel reading, accept him as your special one, as your Messiah and worship.

AMEN.