

May I speak in the name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning. I am delighted to be with you at Dean Jerry's invitation and I bring warm good wishes from your sister cathedral in Wakefield.

No less warm I assure you, for these good wishes being conveyed at a distance, rather than in person.

Of course being physically distant from others has been part of our way of life for the past few months, and for me this meant a digital Father's Day celebration last weekend with our three children.

One of my Father's Day gifts was a newish novel by James Meek called 'To Calais, In Ordinary Time'. It's set on the eve of the arrival of the Black Death in England in 1348. The novel vividly conveys the confusion that was felt by the population of mid-14th century England, as rumours of the coming plague, as it was called, began to spread.

There is apprehension, scepticism, confusion, and dark humour: it's very much a novel for our times.

Amongst other things the novel reminded me of the limitations of the human imagination when it comes to assessing the future consequences of events in which we are actual participants or witnesses. In the case of the Black Death, those consequences included massive changes in the social and economic structures of society: the creation of new centres of learning to train the large numbers of clergy needed to replace those who had died.

There were accelerated developments in medicine, and even cultural shifts in literature, art, and architecture. But all these consequences took years, decades, even centuries, to become apparent. For those living through the plague, the only reference points for understanding what was happening, and what the events might mean, were the past and the present. In 1348 to adapt a phrase of L. P. Hartley the future was a foreign country in which they would do things differently.

Let's move from 14<sup>th</sup> century England to 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, the setting for our Gospel reading. Jesus has come with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, to the northeast of Galilee. With no preamble Jesus asks his disciples a direct question: who do people say the Son of Man is?

Matthew's previous uses of the phrase 'son of man' make it clear that Jesus is talking about himself, when he asks this question. And the disciples' response indicates that the contemporaries of Jesus are using the past as their primary reference point.

Some say Jesus is John the Baptist, recently beheaded. Others say Elijah from several centuries before. Still others that he is one of the prophets who came after Elijah.

So the thoughts hopes and expectations of a Jewish people, about who Jesus is, are framed by the understanding of the way in which God has worked through his messengers in the past.

Then Jesus asks his disciples another question: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter’s answer is swift and unequivocal: “you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” It is a moment of deep intuition, not a characteristic that Peter is noted for elsewhere in the Gospels.

Jesus rewards Peter’s intuition with affirmation, and with a heavy responsibility. “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”.

Jesus has recognised that Peter’s insight is a revelation from God; a revelation made possible by Peter’s faith that God will act, decisively in history, through his own anointed one: his Messiah.

But at the very end of this incident, Jesus orders the disciples not to reveal his true identity to anyone. Peter may have given the right answer to the question, but it is an answer necessarily framed, by his present understanding, of how God might use His anointed one to exercise his creative and redeeming power.

But actually, what’s to come, is still unsure. Subjects to the unfolding of God’s time, and only glimpsed through human discernment.

And so, to our own times. As we emerge from months of lockdown, there is a super abundance of futurologists all over the media: the environment; world trade; personal finance; geopolitics; information technology; retail: there is no area of human activity, it seems, that has not been subject to intense speculation about its post-COVID future.

The church has not been immune to this sort of speculation. Our buildings; stipendiary ministry; digital worship; governance: what will our future look like?

For Christians it seems to me, at least, much of this speculation, including about the church, has often missed the point.

Whether we are talking about the church, or about anything else, the future does not belong to us. It is not ours to possess.

Listen to God’s words, as spoken through the prophecy of Isaiah.

“I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?”

The future is in God’s ever creative hands. Our task is to perceive; to discern; and to frame our actions, according to the will, words, and deeds, of the one whom we now know, as Peter did not at Caesarea Philippi, came not to be served, but to serve: Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

May the Ministry of all of you at Bradford Cathedral, exercised so richly in Christ’s name, be blessed through the grace of God, to whom be glory now, and to the ages of ages. Amen.