

THE EMMAUS SERIES

12th Sunday Year C

Zechariah 12: 10-11; 13: 1

Galatians 3:26-29

Luke 9: 18-24

Who do you say I am?

The overall structure of Luke's gospel is becoming familiar to us. After his ministry in Galilee, Jesus prepares his disciples for what awaits him in Jerusalem. The incident in today's gospel reading from Luke – also emphasised by Mark and Matthew – initiates the formative relationship Jesus now wishes to enter into with his disciples.

'Who do you say I am?' is a very challenging question. Beyond names and family ties, it concerns the commitments and loyalties that shape a person's identity as their life unfolds. It is challenging, because it invites the one addressed to measure themselves against these commitments. What follows in the gospel narrative makes it clear that this is what Jesus intends as he asks his question of his first followers. And he asks the same question of those in every generation. Jesus invites his disciples to identify with his mission for the life of the world, fully aware of all that this mission involves.

Peter, the leader of the group, gives expression to the momentous awareness that has begun to dawn on them: 'You are the anointed one of God' - the one who will bring fulfilment to all the hopes of God's people. The expectations of the people – of a political leader, who would lead the nation to freedom after centuries of humiliation under occupying powers – were far removed from the real designs of God. Jesus, therefore, accepts the truth of Peter's declaration; but he instructs them to keep it to themselves – lest they give rise to a misguided popular movement. He then proceeds to make clear how different his role is from popular expectations: 'The Son of Man must suffer, be rejected and put to death'. The necessity Jesus speaks of ('must suffer') refers to the evil, destructiveness, selfish and foolishness that disfigures the world; God will not nullify the freedom that belongs to creatures made in God's image; he will overcome the evil that disfigures the world by sharing the lot of humanity in the lost world we have made – so that the Cross, the ultimate expression of humanity's abuse of freedom, becomes the ultimate expression of God's love - the tree of life for a redeemed humanity.

The words of Jesus are addressed to us. Living in a world disfigured by destructive forces that seem impossible to overcome, we are called to give ourselves 'every day', in the concrete circumstances of our lives, to all that Jesus stands for, knowing that it is his life-giving 'cross' that we are taking up with him. And, as we live in unshakeable hope in the Saviour's final victory over all evil, we will come to know the joy implied in his words, 'anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it'. The problem of evil was very real for the people of the Old Testament. Scoundrels prospered; and those who confronted them were made to suffer. Our first reading from the prophet Zechariah, looks forward to a final healing, in which those who suffered for justice will be remembered in awe and reverence: 'They will look upon the one they have pierced'. It is not surprising that this text was seen by New Testament authors as foretelling the saving mission of Christ.

John Thornhill sm