**Sermon Transcript: David Williams, Bishop of Basingstoke**

**Week Three: The Way of The Cross – Mark 8:31-38**

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

I'm preaching this morning from Mark Chapter Eight in the context of Generous June, looking at the character of God revealed in Jesus and how we should be and how we should live.

Mark chapter 8 contains the most important question I think we can ever be asked.

It warms up like this: Jesus says to his closest friends: “Who do people say that I am?”. And a number of confused answers come back. But he then looks Peter and the disciples in the face. “Who do you say that I am?”

That to me is the life changing question: “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

Peter, characteristically bold, prepared to take a risk, jumped straight in: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God?”

Jesus then takes the journey a little deeper. For he begins to describe what he has to do. his journey to Jerusalem, his arrest, his death on a cross, and Peter will have none of this. “Lord, they'll have to get past me to get to you. They'll have to kill me before I let this happen. It will never happen.”

And Jesus looks him in the face again. And says probably the most devastating words anyone has ever said. “Get behind Me, Satan.” You are operating in the wrong way, Peter.

I'd say we stand on holy ground when we sense Jesus. God is asking us a question. “Who do you say that I am?” I want to shout it from the rooftops, don't you? Yes, I do know who you are. You are Jesus, my friend, my Lord, my Saviour.

But what if the Jesus we proclaim to follow has different standards to the ones we expect? What if he's asking so much more? What if he's asking us to follow in his steps to say, Lord would you work in me and work that my character might become more like yours, that my priorities might not be my own but yours, that your story quite literally will become my story?

We're given a huge hint into the character of God, into the character of Jesus, by Paul. He wrote in Philippians Chapter Two, probably a hymn they used to sing in the early church, that this Jesus, who we call our friend, was rich, but became poor for our sakes - gave up the glory of heaven to come and live as one of us amongst us, from the womb to the tomb. He lived amongst us.

And then, to the horror of the human race, to the horror, to our horror, 2000 years later, this lovely man who taught so well, who demonstrated a life where the other person mattered, who spotted people that no one else saw who healed the sick, raised the dead, fed the hungry, challenged us to live by a different story, was taken, put in front of a mockery of a trial and crucified on a cross.

The story, of course, did not end there.

For that bleakest day, was to come to be known as Good Friday. For somehow in his death on a cross, we found that he identified with us more than that, he declared his victory over every sin and every ill and more than that, that somehow he took my place as he died on a cross. The one who had everything gave up everything for the whole human race, but very personally for me and for you.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus would ask us - how does this link to how we

then should live?

I think it changes everything. There's a wonder in my mind, that people call the

encounter with Jesus being born again. You discover a new way of seeing yourself, a new way of seeing the world. A new way of seeing your possessions a new way. Of seeing your time, a new way of seeing everything.

And for the follower of Christ, we begin to live a life that is rooted in gratitude. That just wants to say thank you, Lord. Thank You, Lord, for this moment. For every breath that I take for every gift you have given.

And then the real change begins, as we realise, that what he's given us is to be given away to be shared, that we hold nothing back because God has held nothing back for us.

Over the last two years, I found myself deeply challenged and encouraged, challenged by the astonishing offering of voluntary help through the pandemic. People who freely gave their time stood in cold queues outside vaccination centres, graciously greeting each person and directing them in a safe way. People who got to know the names of their neighbours and went and collected prescriptions and food for those who are struggling, people who gave money to those in need. I'm so grateful that in many of our churches, we didn't see a reduction in income during COVID. In fact, the reverse, we saw people giving more and more generously. Surely, it's in moments like that, that the true nature of our Christian faith is revealed, tested and we discover who we really are.

And now in 2022, with the awful events that have unfolded in the Ukraine, I'm again astounded that more bedrooms have been offered to host people who have had to run from their home than there are people running from their home.

The English nation, the people who live in this nation, have discovered a new gift for hospitality and welcome. And I wonder if that also points to a renewed future as we seek to work out what values we live by.

And of course, for the Christian who has seen what Jesus has done for them, we'd like to be in the front of the queue to offer of ourselves. But of course, what we do together in the Christian community is so much more than the sum of the parts.

First, Jesus dealt and challenged people, although he dealt personally and called people by name. He always asked a response of the gathered community and so in your own local church, as you go through this journey of generosity, what might it be the Lord is calling you to?

I think for me personally, it always starts with an acknowledgement that my story is the Lord’s story, and I need to be changed. I need to be on my knees, spending time with Him, asking him to change the way I see myself the way I see my neighbours, the way I see Jesus, and what he's done for me.

And then I discovered that I have to begin to change my mind about what I'll do the things that he's entrusted me with.

How can I use my time? Sometimes the hardest thing is to be generous with our time.

How do I use my hospitality? Am I really ready to open the doors of my house

and to eat a meal with people who will never perhaps reciprocate?

But actually, simply realising I'm exercising a gift of hospitality?

How do I protect myself from wanting more?

Being caught up, in a culture of possession of wanting more and more,

 I find the greatest antidote to that is to give - why? Because he gave himself for us.

So whether it's your time, whether it's your hospitality and welcome,

whether it's prayerfully deciding what it is you want to give away, whether to the Disasters Emergency Committee, responding to human migration across the globe, or whether it's a significant gift to local church.

I don't think this is a fundraising pitch. I think this is a discipleship challenge.

“Who do you say that I am?” would ask the Lord Jesus. And I wonder if he'd whisper in your ear to ask: “what do you think I think of you?” We would hear the Lord whispering in our ears, that he knows us by name. He's called us his own. And he longs to pour the gifts of grace into our lives. So that we find we are equipped to walk in the way of the cross to follow him, because death is never the end of the story.

We've had to re-evaluate everything over the last two years. There are lots of things we've got wrong. And there are lots of things that God in his grace would encourage us to see differently.

I wonder, as we pray for the sustaining and the renewing of the Church of God in this land, new priorities may be focused around ensuring that we pass the Good News of Jesus Christ onto every succeeding generation. You and I will find as we get a little bit older, perhaps we're more ready to give, not to save for our own personal security, or to mitigate the risks we think we might face, but if you'd like almost to invest in God's kingdom, because we're investing in the next generation, of the people of God.

On that road to Jerusalem, Jesus with his friends turned and asked a personal question.

“Who do you say that I am?”

I wonder if today, you'd let the Lord ask that question of you.

And then as you answer it, would you follow in the footsteps of the one who gave everything.

Lord, speak to our hearts. Speak to our minds and give us the willingness to follow more closely.

For Jesus’ sake and for the glory of his name in our community, Amen.