

Heavenly Father, by your Spirit, help us to see Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the living God. Amen.

- Just over a week go, Helen and I were standing on what is to my mind the most beautiful place on earth, a particular cliff top in Cornwall just west of Bedruthen Steps where the heather and the gorse trumpet a carpet of pinks, purples and yellows against a back drop of deep green, with wheeling seabirds, hovering kestrels and the blue, grey, green of the Atlantic Ocean stretching away to infinity. Usually you can feel the wind on your face, the unique almost Mediterranean smell of the heather in your nostrils, the cry of the kittiwakes in your ears, and the taste of the salt on your lips. The assault upon the senses makes me feel utterly alive.
- This year we were especially blessed on several occasions to see a small colony of choughs. Like a smallish crow, with red legs and a distinctive red beak, pointing slightly downwards. They wheel crazily in flight and congregate companionably on the clifftop, presumably searching for food. We enjoyed sharing the space with them, and they did not seem to be too concerned about us.
- In order to get to the cliff there is a stiffish climb up a rough cliffpath which takes about ten minutes and it always amazes me how many people, including some of those in our own family, who never make the effort. “We’ve seen choughs!” we say excitedly. “Oh” is normally the reply as they carry on with their doughnut, and I think I know who has got the better deal! They have little conception of what they are missing.
- We are in a bizarre situation at the moment where worship together as Christians is severely hampered.
  - We can’t share the peace. We’re not supposed to talk to each other. There’s no wine at communion and we’re not allowed to sing. If you don’t come to physical church, then Zoom offers some of these, and people enjoy seeing faces rather than the backs of other people’s heads, but it’s not the same as sharing a cup of coffee after the service, and it’s quite hard talking about your health if you know another 23 people are listening. And if you can’t come to either, it must feel particularly lonesome on occasion, even with the strenuous efforts we have made to make you feel loved and cherished.
- People won’t want to come when it’s so lacking in the joy of singing and audience participation! It’s a bit like the top of the cliff in Cornwall without the heather and the gorse and with starling instead of chough.
- I’ll let you into a secret. Like the climb up the cliffpath, I’m not sure they wanted to come much anyway. The assault upon the senses of good worship brings you into such direct conflict with the doughnuts of everyday life.
  - But it is why it is so important for you and me, to keep on worshipping together, to hold onto the jewel that we have; that of following the Messiah, the Son of the living God.
- Otherwise it’s just so easy to relegate Jesus to a nice safe place in your life where he doesn’t challenge and becomes at worst a common swear word and at best a nice man who died so we can get to heaven. And how on earth does that work? There’s some nice people here today, I can even see a few, but much as I love you, I don’t think your death would make any difference to whether I get to heaven or not.
- ‘*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*’ Simon was so groundbreaking when he uttered these words that he earned himself the nickname, Rock. Why is it so momentous? Why is Jesus’s reaction so joyously affirming? ‘*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*’ What is it saying that ensures we know Jesus is more than just a nice man?
- Well, you might be nice people, but you are not Sons of the living God, or at least you wouldn’t be if Jesus wasn’t the first one, spearheading the way from God to his wonderful, beautiful, vibrantly living, deeply sinful creation. God has come close through his only Son Jesus Christ.
  - A real link, now, today, between God and us; heaven and earth.
- When I typed this just now, I realised I had typed a rail link between God and us, instead of a real link. Maybe that makes the point even more concrete. Jesus is the assurance that God and the world are close rather than a distant destination. Jesus is that man with the hessian face mask sitting on the opposite side of the carriage!
  - But it can be a bit uncomfortable allowing God to get too near. He might discover what you’re really like. He might dispose of a few of those comfortable assumptions you have made about life; that it’s ok

to put yourself first. That it doesn't really matter if you ignore climate change; that it's fine not to declare that extra income to the tax man because nobody will ever know.

- Messiah is the Aramaic form of the Greek word, Christ. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ.
- The Messiah is the one sent by God to lead. To lead the Jews to freedom in the way God wants, which was not necessarily the way that they hoped. He wants to lead us into the ways of justice, forgiveness and peace., which is not economically viable for us and did not dispose of the Romans or the Jews.
- The Messiah is the one sent to suffer on our behalf. To die on a cross. Because of all this human sinfulness. And to show that God still loves us, even if we kill his Son, and will go on forgiving us, and wanting to come close, until we get to that day when we are brought face to face with him at the judgement seat of eternity.
  - But we spend all our time wanting to get rid of suffering rather than embracing it. To speak of cruelty and crucifixion is somehow rather coarse and unpleasant and we should not do it in this land of clean new cars and power showers. If you're suffering, take some paracetamol!
- And God looks and suffers and loves. The common view of love is of something pink and fluffy. The solution to all our problems. All you need is love. It'll take your pain away.
- In my experience love usually leads to sacrifice, the sacrifices I make because of the people I love and the sacrifices they make on my account. It leads to heartache and loss of personal choice because you're putting the other person first. But like the climb up the cliffpath, it's indisputably worth it and it's addictive, the more you immerse yourself in the suffering of love, the deeper you want to go.
- This was dangerous in New Testament times and it's dangerous today.
- Anyone proclaiming themselves as Messiah would excite the interest of the Romans who would see it as sedition, and of the Jews who were clamouring for freedom from the bondage of Roman occupation.
- Perhaps that why Jesus took the disciples all the way to Caesarea Philippi, 20 miles north of Lake Galilee, which in those days was rather like going north of Inverness to make an important announcement. Perhaps that's why, *'he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.'*
- And it's dangerous today, because we don't speak the words people want to hear. They want a cure for pain, whereas Christianity speaks of the value of pain. The natural desire of human beings is to live happily ever after, but we don't preach fairy tales, we preach engagement with reality. And certainly at the moment, the inclination is to be suspicious of strangers in case they give you something nasty, whereas the Messiah leads us to welcome and acceptance. And that brings us into conflict.
- So you and I have a daily choice. We can choose to be conformed to the daily expectations of life. To accept the world as it is, to live with the sin and feel comfortable with it. Not to worry about teenage refugees drowning in rubber dinghies trying to cross the Channel; to conveniently ignore the people of Belarus as they strive for a more humane society; to miss eye-contact with the harassed mother despairingly buying cut-price doughnuts for her fractious three year old because it stops her thinking about the debt she's got as a result of lockdown.
- Or ... we can follow the Messiah to a different view of reality, throw ourselves on the mercies of the Son of God, the suffering Messiah, and feel his pain. Being transformed by it and engaging with a bit more of the pain of the world. Smiling at the harassed mother and buying her a coffee so you can have a chat. Praying daily for the people of Belarus. Campaigning for a more constructive way of dealing with the insoluble but appalling plight of refugees.
- See if you can spot these themes in the first two verses of our first reading.
- St Paul writes to the Romans, *'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.'*
- That's the Christian calling to follow the Messiah. It's not easy and we will fail and feel heartache. But it will bring us to the top of the cliffpath and allow us to engage with the joy of real life