

Sermon on Mark 8:31-end

Lent 2

Feb 2021

This is without a doubt a difficult passage but actually quite crucial for our understanding of what it really means to follow Jesus. To set the scene, Jesus and the disciples are travelling around the villages around Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was an ancient Roman City at the base of Mount Hebron in what are now known as the Golan Heights. It was a place where the false gods Baal and later Pan were worshipped. The spring that issues from a cave there is a main source of the River Jordan. Jesus has just asked the disciples who people are saying He is and who do they think He is, and Peter has proclaimed, "You are the Christ"! Christ in Greek and messiah in Hebrew and Aramaic means, The Anointed One. It implies one who is set aside by God for a specific purpose and had in the past been used of Kings and Priests, more recently it had come to be used particularly of the one the Jews were expecting God to send, who would free them once and for all from those who oppressed them.

When Peter says that Jesus is the chosen one who has been sent to them, the promised Christ, Jesus does not deny it. In fact, in Matthew's account, He tells Peter that this knowledge has been given to him by God. He warns the disciples not to tell anyone what they know. This seems to mark a turning point in Jesus ministry, He begins to teach the disciples in earnest and specially to prepare them for what is going to happen, He tells them that He will undergo great suffering, be killed and in three days rise again. Well, this was pretty hard for them to grasp. They had realised that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah and they had many preconceptions and expectations of what this would mean. Their mindset, what they had been taught and had been waiting for all their lives, was a man who would lead them to overcome the Romans who occupied their land and the puppet King Herod, would

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reclaim the land God had given them and take the throne to rule over them. They knew that Jesus had extraordinary powers, they had witnessed all sorts of different miracles, they knew that God was with him. And here He was talking about being rejected, suffering, and being killed. They wanted a Messiah who would win not lose. The concept of winning by willingly giving up, losing what is rightfully yours was just beyond them. It isn't how they thought the world worked. It isn't how we think the world works. And it was all too much for Peter. He was so disturbed by what Jesus was saying that he took Him to one side and had the audacity to rebuke Him. Jesus famously responded by saying, get behind me Satan! Obviously, He wasn't saying that Peter was Satan but that he was allowing himself to think only in worldly terms and not setting his mind on God's plans, and in doing so was allowing himself to be open to doing the devil's work and not God's. Jesus was going to do it God's way, the way that He and His Father and the Holy Spirit had planned. At this point, Peter only understood how worldly kingdoms work.

Gideon Heugh from Tearcraft puts it like this:

“Worldly kingdoms dominate; the heavenly kingdom liberates. Worldly kingdoms marginalise; the heavenly kingdom includes. Worldly kingdoms control; the heavenly kingdom serves. Worldly kingdoms are centred on the self; the heavenly kingdom pours itself out for others.”

So, Jesus called together the crowd along with the disciples and explained, “if you want to belong to me, you have to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What good would it do you to gain the whole world but lose your life? If you are ashamed of me, the time will come when I will be ashamed of you”.

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C.F.D Moule clarified this when he said that it is not about people carrying a burden in life. That is how we use the expression isn't it? Oh that is my cross to bear. No people who carried crosses were people who were going to be executed. To carry your cross means to be willing to die. For some Christians this has meant and continues to mean in many places in the world that they will physically die because they follow Jesus. But in a much broader sense Jesus means that we have to be prepared to give our whole lives over to following Him. Are we? Am I? The reality is that this is the only way to find total freedom.

If you clutch your life wholly to yourself, protecting it against all others, asserting all your rights and privileges, you lose it, because it isn't life any longer. If, however, you acknowledge that life is not yours by right, that it is all privilege, and it is to be lived in the love that the gospel story reveals, the self-giving love of Jesus, then you possess it wholly. The world's riches, all the self-seeking, self-serving pleasure that the world has to offer is nothing compared to the inner freedom of loving and being loved by God. The offer of being a person in whom God Himself wants to live!

Discovering yourself, finding out who you are, being your best self, living your best life, these are phrases that are banded about these days. Everyone wants to know who they really are. Christians know that the way to find out who we are is by discovering who Jesus is. Paul got it – he said, "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." This does not mean that we lose our unique identity, but rather through Jesus living in us we are becoming the people that God made us to be, our true selves. In the paradoxical looking glass world of the kingdom of God, self-denial is the way to total and complete self-fulfilment!

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The news about the cross that the disciples found it so hard to hear about and contemplate, is actually the way to freedom and fulfilment. If we are willing to lay down our earthly, worldly, self-seeking lives, to die to this life, we receive in return a new life, a life lived with Jesus, serving others as he serves, loving others as he loves, realising what has eternal significance and meaning and becoming the very best version of ourselves.

There is of course also the final warning in this passage. If all of this is a bit embarrassing, if we are ashamed to own Jesus in front of others, to admit that we belong to Him, to talk about who He is and what He has done for us, then, when we stand before the Father, as every soul who ever lived will, then Jesus will be ashamed of us. We don't necessarily have to do great things. All that is asked of us is faithfulness, all that is required is that we acknowledge Jesus and seek to live the way He wants us to live. You may be called to do extraordinary things. I know more than one elderly person who has smuggled Bibles into China for example. Others I know have taken sewing machines to villages in Africa and taught people to use them. Still others have gone to India and prayed for people and seen incredible miracles. But most likely you are called to be you, to live your life in Christ, exactly where you are. To bless those around you in your neighbourhood, to reveal Jesus to others in the life you lead, in the words you speak and through the love you show and if that is what God is asking you to do, it will be just as exciting and fulfilling. In the end it is all about Jesus. If we are all about ourselves, we will lose ourselves and lose Him. If we are all about Jesus and serving others as our servant King has taught us, then we will know the perfect freedom, peace, and fulfilment that He has promised us.