

## Mark 8:31-38

Chapter 8 is the turning point of Mark's Gospel. Peter has confessed Jesus as the Christ (Mark 8:29), the Messiah - a ruler, descended from King David, who will answer the hopes of the nation and bring in a rule of justice and peace (Isaiah 9:6-7). The disciples think they understand what this means.

From here on, the story will be all about *why Jesus came* and Jesus' ideas are different to Peter's. The Messiah **is** here, but he is a Messiah the people neither expect nor want.

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Jesus predicts his death

There are two shocking things in the passage. First, the one sent to bring the kingdom to earth should suffer and be rejected. That's just **not** how it should play out. The King is meant to come in on a white charger, in power and glory, subdue the enemies at the point of a sword, establish peace and set his people up in prosperity. The crowds should be cheering him in and the Lord's goodness win the day.

The Jews of the time, the disciples with them, were expecting a political and military overthrow of the Romans and the establishment of God's rule. Instead Jesus is speaking about being rejected and dying.

Peter has some grasp that his Rabbi is the one sent by God, and there's no denying his allegiance at this point. The problem is he cannot conceive of the sort of path his Messiah wants to walk to reach his goal. It is unfathomable, its unthinkable, and that's why he crosses the line and corrects his master. He tries to do it on the quiet taking Jesus aside, Jesus is having none of it.

We're not used to hearing Jesus speak so firmly. He's been frustrated with them before and he's chastised them for their lack of faith and slow learning, but these are very strong words to speak to a friend and student in everyone's hearing.

*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things (Mark8:33).*

Why does he speak like this?

Peter's desire for the liberation of his people, and the overthrow of the Romans was a noble one. It was based on an historical understanding of the Scriptures and encouraged by what he had witnessed in the ministry of Jesus to this point. He'd seen healing, authoritative teaching and miracles, which showed Jesus' power and pointed to a new liberating work of God. His vision of the Messiah was big, it was about national redemption, the overthrow of rulers, it was a kingdom of God scale vision.

But his vision was not large enough. He could only see as far as his own tribe, his own corner of the world, he was only thinking on a human level, so he risked derailing

Jesus' mission. And in the background, unseen by Peter, the same Enemy that tested Jesus' call in the wilderness was trying again to divert him from his path.

Mark has told us that Jesus didn't stay in Capernaum to become the local miracle worker; and he didn't want Moses and Elijah camping on the Mountain to start a pilgrimage site; in the wilderness Jesus committed to his call rather than give in to the Enemy's persuasion. Jesus is again tested but he has his hopes set on the Father's kingdom coming with power, of all things being made new.

The Father's plans extend beyond Israel, across the seas, to the four corners of the globe. God had planned a revolution, whose victory would come by the unexpected path of humility and obedience, through suffering and sacrifice, and which would look like foolishness not wisdom.

But it would be a perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, bringing reconciliation between God and people, healing divisions, restoring creation itself and bringing heaven and earth into harmony again. God's plan was expansive, extraordinary, colossal. It is **still** beyond our comprehension.

Peter's thinking was way too small, and because he was one of the three closest to Jesus, it was important the others hear the strength of Jesus' conviction - the way he intended to go, and what it meant to follow him, against expectations.

It looked like a way of weakness, it was a costly way and a hard way. Jesus himself, in the last hours in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–39), would pray for a different outcome, but in the end submits to the only path that will achieve the goal.

With Mark, we know that while the story continues beyond the grave. At this point it's hard to see, but in the end it will be shown that the message of Christ, the true gospel is not about material gain, economic or political power, it's not about self-preservation, or the salvation of one ethnic group. It is about healing, renewal, reconciliation and resurrection for all with ears to hear and hearts to respond, and it's sufficient for all of humanity to respond should they do so.

Mark tells us Jesus 'spoke plainly to them,' he began to teach them what this all meant, but it would be some time before they understood (Mark 8:31).

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## The way of the cross as discipleship

The second shocking thing in these verses is the description of discipleship. We hear on one hand a challenge to be unashamed of Jesus and his message not too bad. But on the other are harder words of taking up the cross, losing one's life and putting the offerings of the world in second place to the pursuit of God's way.

It's one thing for Jesus to choose this path, but exceedingly uncomfortable to hear that those who follow will have to bear the cross as well.

As we hear this we have to unpack our cultural baggage. We wear a cross as jewelry and use them to decorate our sanctuaries, they are badges of honour, beautiful icons to us...but there is no way to understand the cross except as a tool of execution, of a public and humiliating death. It's equivalent - having a noose pinned to our shirt, or a guillotine hanging from a chain around our neck. Let that sit with you a moment.

So. Carrying one's cross, carrying the crossbeam on one's shoulders, evokes the journey a person takes to that final horrible destination. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about it, this isn't a metaphor about giving up something we enjoy.

*Father we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice...*

It's about giving ourselves up and walking a hard path that brings us pain and shame not glory and popularity. Like the disciples it's shocking for us to hear.

We instinctively place ourselves at the centre of the universe, we value our achievements, we want it to go well for us. But Jesus says if you follow me, I am at the centre, you follow where I lead, you follow me on the way of the cross. The disciples have a vivid image...they've seen the bodies hanging along the roadside. He's not talking about a spiritual journey where they are spectators in the Colosseum as some other guy dies.

Mark continues the discipleship challenge. Jesus tells his friends that there is no quantity or quality of things in life that will compensate for losing eternal security. Those who aim to preserve life for themselves, by taking the way of prosperity, will find they have miscalculated. They will have gained momentary treasures at the expense of things that last. It's not possible to have it both ways, a disciple 'cannot serve two masters' (Matthew 6:24).

The consequences are serious...paying lip service to Jesus will mean on the final day, he will not introduce us to his Father. Being ashamed of Jesus in this life, will bring us shame in the next.

The invitation is to follow Jesus and to live for bigger things. He set us an example:

*let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).*

His invitation is to trust him, to

*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and [trust] all these things you need will be given as well (Matthew 6:33).*

It's an alternative lifestyle, where one practices self-denial instead of self-centredness; instead of grasping life, giving it away to God, in justice and right living, and humble service of others. It is a choice to live and die for bigger things.

Witnessing the resurrection of their Lord, the disciples were transformed, they relinquished their small vision, they took up their cross and followed him.

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What about us?

Two points to ponder on this second Sunday of Lent as we walk to Easter.

Who do we say that Jesus is? We can say he's a teacher, a prophet, a wise one, a healer, a socialist, a motivational speaker, even a sort of Messiah if you like the sound of that. But a Jesus less than he actually is cannot save or cleanse us and cannot sustain us from this day to the next, let alone raise us and bring us to the new creation. Jesus must be taken for who he is not who we want him to be.

Second. We are all giving our lives away. The question is to what? We can live our life meeting our own needs, but Jesus invites us to give our lives to him. Let's not try to follow Jesus by staying neutral or safe, let's follow him and become more like him.

We find ourselves in front of Jesus like the rich young ruler (Luke 12), who wants to know how to please God, how to receive eternal life. Jesus answers him like he does the disciples... *whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

Can we take up our cross and follow him, can we choose to die when our culture offers us life, and our pockets are full of goodness? Our hearts sink like his did. We want to save our lives in this life not die! Can we trust that in losing we win, in giving away we gain?

When we choose to give our lives away, we have faith that the experience of Jesus and others before us will also be ours. That our deepest fulfilment and joy will come as we walk the path of sacrificial living in the footsteps of Christ and find everything else fall into place, that on that last day he will name us to his Father and welcome us home. He promised a hard path...but he promised his company and said...

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:10-11).*

Follow him.

*Feasting on the Word/Gospels Year B/Mark; Pursing Justice: Wytstma; A Ransom for Many: the Gospel of Mark Simply Explained (Welwyn Commentary Series); Wilmhurst, Steve Bible Gateway*