

Sermon for 25th February 2024 – Year B – Lent 2

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Mark 8:31-38

This precise moment in Mark's gospel is as uncomfortable for us now as it was for Peter the disciple. As modern Christians, we're very comfortable with the kind, compassionate Jesus, full of healing and peace and the inclusion of the outcast – especially if we are the outcast (and let's face it, most of us are, in one way or another). And we're also fairly comfortable with the glorious, resurrected Jesus, divine Christ, Lord of heaven and earth. But I don't think we're quite so comfortable with this Jesus, when he starts talking about discipleship in terms of rejection and suffering.

Just three verses earlier, Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but now he's already rebuking Jesus for his explanation of what being the Messiah will mean. It's understandable; Peter, along with many of the disciples, sees Jesus as a revolutionary king in waiting, not as a potential victim of the evil powers-that-be.

But Jesus doubles down, calls the whole crowd into the conversation and tells them that not only is *he* going to the Cross, but anyone who wants to be his disciple must also take up their own cross and follow.

The trouble is that taking up a cross is not in any way appealing, and as the basis for a religion it's a really hard sell. Most religions work on a sort of transaction model: if you worship our god and follow our rules, then our god will bless you and give you what you want, be that food, wealth, or power. Christianity is not like this. Christianity is about choosing to be a person who loves God and other people, practices justice and mercy, and then accepts the social consequences of that, come what may. The main question for Christians is not 'how do we

persuade God to give us what we want?’ but ‘how do become the sort of people God desires us to be?’

Over the centuries, we Christians have become comfortable with watching Jesus teach and heal, and we’re even a little bit comfortable with seeing *him* on the Cross, since at least we know he doesn’t stay there very long. But while the Cross of Christ dominates many churches, our own crosses are rarely to be seen!

We perhaps hope that by dying on the Cross, Jesus has done everything that needs doing, and we can sit back and relax, but this passage in Mark’s Gospel reminds us that we are not called simply to be observers and applauders of Jesus, but to become participants in loving and serving others, with all the painful consequences that may entail.

When Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, he is speaking for all of us in our reluctance to take this path of self-sacrifice. Peter obviously didn’t want Jesus to suffer and be crucified, and he plainly loves his teacher, but there’s still a strong selfishness in how he feels. Peter doesn’t want Jesus to be a victim because *he’s* given up everything in the hope that Jesus will be victorious and become an actual king, the true descendent of King David! And if Jesus is king, then Peter also will bask in that reflected glory. He has signed up for a crown, not a cross!

So, there’s this tension in how we all respond to Jesus. We face the same confusion that Peter faced. We want the resurrected Christ, full of glory, king of heaven, who can solve our problems, heal our woundedness, bring peace to our anxiety, and teach us how to live full and happy lives. And we accept, with some reluctance, that Easter Sunday does not really come without Good Friday. But we forget that this is not a struggle for Jesus alone; it is our struggle too.

There are no painless shortcuts for the Messiah. He cannot reach Resurrection without the Cross. He cannot be victorious over death without laying down his

life for others. And the same is true for us. Time and again our selfishness will make us seek a painless way to get what we want. We all want to be a good person, or at least we want to be seen to be a good person; we want to be compassionate to others, but few are willing to give up very much to do it.

This is why Jesus rebukes Peter with those harsh words, “Get behind me, Satan!” and tells the whole crowd that they must deny themselves to follow him. This isn’t metaphor or hyperbole - it’s the cornerstone of Jesus’ teaching. If we’re in it for ourselves, then we have rather missed the point, which is to love and serve others, even if it costs more than we can bear.

This is very tough to hear, and very tough to preach, which is perhaps why the Church reserves these kinds of passages for Lent. We much prefer the ‘God the almighty creator loves you no matter what’ kind of sermon, and I must confess I prefer writing them, but we must remember that even though Peter was the closest of all the disciples to Jesus, Jesus did not spare him this harshest of rebukes when he tried to divert Jesus from his sacrificial path. Instead, he told Peter that he must take up his cross as well, which of course he eventually did.

As Christians, we are all disciples of Jesus the Messiah, but what we are learning from Jesus is how to follow the path of the Messiah ourselves. We mustn’t think that only Jesus has a Cross, and we mustn’t think that only Jesus is the Messiah. I know, it’s a bit of a shock. We truly want to believe that Jesus took up his Cross so we don’t have to. But, just as Jesus taught, and as Peter eventually learned, there is only one way to truly follow the Lord, and that is to set aside our selfishness, take up our own cross, and follow faithfully in his footsteps.