

Sermon for Sunday 12th September 2021 (Trinity 15) 'Does it always get worse before it gets better?' from Fr. Mike

- Proverbs 1.20-23
- Canticle Wisdom of Solomon 7.26-8.1
- James 3. 1-12
- **Mark 8.27-38**

The Gospel Passage in Context

This is the week of the 'Great North Run' where many thousands of people deliberately put themselves out of their comfort zone for a higher purpose. We are still in the middle of a pandemic. In terms of our scripture, almost exactly at the book's midpoint, this gospel passage triggers a major shift in Mark's plot. The word *Christ* has not appeared since the Gospel's opening verse. So far, we have had seven chapters of Jesus' ministry, questions asked about his true identity and authority, secrets revealed, disclosure promised, and demonic powers identifying Jesus as God's Son. Readers have been given no indication that death awaits Jesus.

Suddenly Jesus is near Caesarea Philippi, a very Roman setting and once the limit of ancient Israel's northward extension. Here he pops the question: "Who do people say that I am?" *Now* he wants to discuss his reputation, *here* at this borderland?

Before the scene ends Jesus announces, for the first of multiple times, his impending suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. He also (finally!) starts to tell his disciples and others just what he wants from them. Now he *describes* what following means: it's self-denial and cross-bearing. *Now* we see where this road of discipleship will lead: in losing one's life, and ironically thereby to saving it.

Following will also make a particular kind of statement, and crosses feature in the equation. Consequently, it's going to get messy.

“Who Do People Say That I Am?”

When people offer John, Elijah, or one of the prophets as responses to Jesus' question, they give sensible answers. After all, much of Jesus' ministry has clearly evoked the legacy of these figures through his calls to repentance, healings, and meals served in the wilderness.

Yet Peter's claim, **“You are the Christ,”** makes an astounding statement. So far, Jesus hasn't done anything that looks particularly “Christ”- like. The few Jewish texts that mention “the Christ” paint a very different picture. This means Peter's comment is anticipatory. Peter cannot be saying, “The stuff you're doing, Jesus, reminds me of those obscure references we find in some writings about a uniquely anointed — that is, divinely authorised — deliverer.” No, by calling Jesus “the Christ,” at this point in the story, Peter declares, “I think you're the one who will purify our society, restore Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you.”

No wonder Peter lays into Jesus in verse 32. Suffering? Rejection? Killed? Wasn't Jesus paying attention when Peter said he was *the Christ*? Everything Jesus describes in verse 31 would appear to disqualify him from being that person. Good thing Peter is there to straighten Jesus out and show him the path the Christ is supposed to follow!

Peter certainly gets the title right, but the meaning wrong.

His confession uses technically accurate language, but he cannot yet see what this language entails.

Not only does the identity of Jesus *include* his eventual death and resurrection; it will finally be *defined* by those things.

And so, Jesus — just like the Gospel author — embarks on a project of recasting who “the Christ” is and what he will do. Jesus will NOT wield power over others; instead, powerful and cynical people will have their way with him.

Whispered discussions about Jesus’ identity result in an open invitation to participate. Mark’s Jesus isn’t so much about gathering pupils or making sure everyone understands him. He calls followers. Want to see who he really is? Join him and you will find out! It is crucial to view Jesus’ invitation (v.34-38) in connection with what he has just revealed about himself. The imperatives “let them deny themselves” and “let them take up their cross” risk becoming trite aphorisms if we forget they are about following *this* man, the one who has just described his fate.

Self-denial (a notion John Calvin said constitutes “the sum of the Christian life”) is not primarily about suppressing our desires or delaying gratification. Jesus calls us to separate ourselves from what defines us. A person in Jesus’ culture was defined by those to whom he belonged — usually household or kin. Jesus calls people to embrace new understandings of identity. Disciples join a community defined by association with Jesus. And even Jesus himself denies conventional understandings of who he must be (see Mark 3:31-35). Next, they enter a new family comprising all the followers of Jesus. At this point it is worth reflecting on the fact that **self-denial is not self-annihilation, but rather complete redefinition.**

Self-denial does not mean seeking or embracing abuse for its own sake, as if suffering itself is redemptive or somehow a mark of virtue. Jesus has spent over seven chapters alleviating needless suffering or oppression whenever he encounters it; so how could he be endorsing these things here?

Do not allow this text to perpetuate or excuse victimisation. The kind of suffering Jesus acknowledges as a reality in this passage (v.35) is a *particular* kind; namely, persecution resulting from simply following him. Self-denial and redefinition clearly come with their risks.

Likewise, 'cross-bearing' means much more than patience or mere obedience. It means death. It means the resignation of our reputation and life. Crosses imply rejection. Those who bore crosses in the Roman imperial world were publicly declaring that their society (or leaders) had denied them. Those who follow Jesus, associating with this vividly rejected Christ, take on an identity and a way of living that pose threats to the world's corrosive ideologies and idolatries.

Christ calls all followers to journey with him. Therefore, knowledge about the true identity of Jesus is useless if it remains either dormant or abstract. Following Jesus then, is not a meandering intellectual voyage. It points a particular direction and demands action, ending up at crucifixion and resurrection. In a nutshell then: Want to learn who Jesus really is? Put yourself out and follow him. Remember, it's a way open to "any" who manage to bless the Lord in words and deeds, whilst refraining from cursing their neighbours. **'Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.'** (James 3.10)

Fr. Mike (Sunday 12th September 2021)