

Scripture Reading For Sunday 16th September 2018

Mark 8:27-38 (NIV)

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” ²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Sermon: “Who Do You Say That I am?”

Part of our family vacation this last year was spent at the Blue Mountains near Collingwood. One of our hikes was on a steep route that literally went straight-up the hillside. As we went up, I kept encouraging Jonathan and Julia that the top was just beyond the next ridge. Of course, when we reached that ridge we would then see another one beyond; and this happened more than once! But, eventually, we could truly see the top and once we reached there we could rest and look back at the beautiful view. I’m sure that you’ve had similar experiences of your own. Mark takes us on a similar uphill journey in our reading this morning. It begins at Bethsaida, by the side of the Sea of Galilee, and ends at Caesarea Philippi on the side of Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi lies in the neighbouring region to Galilee and was ruled by Herod Philip, the half-brother of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist killed. In the Old Testament this region was noted for its worship of Baal (or Ba’al) and in Jesus’ day the city boasted a great Temple built by Philip’s father, Herod the Great, and dedicated to the Roman Emperor. Philip had developed the city extensively, hence its name Caesarea Philippi.¹ It was while travelling up-hill to this place, where past and present deities were worshiped, that Jesus poses the seemingly-innocent question to his disciples, “Who do *people* say that I am?”²

¹ Incidentally, in the 66–70AD war, Caesarea Philippi was a staging area for Roman troops invading Palestine and many local Jews had been massacred in this region. Mark’s readers would have appreciated this background context.

² Mark 8:27b.

First of all, we need to appreciate that Mark is building-up to a literary climax at the half-way point through his gospel. Jesus is not really asking this question because he is so heavenly minded that he is out of touch with reality, and so wants the disciples to tell him what the “word is on the street” concerning himself. No, scholars see this as Mark cleverly engaging *his readers* at this pivotal point in Christ’s ministry *through* the words of Jesus. Up until this point, Mark has been presenting Jesus as a teacher, a miracle worker, and an exorcist. These would all have been good answers to the question Jesus posed. Their response, though, seems a little strange to us, they said, “John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets.”³ We find it odd that people could somehow imagine these dead heroes being alive again in Jesus! This distraction is in danger of us missing the point. Mark is repeating here what he stated (two chapters) earlier,⁴ namely, that many saw Jesus as a *bold* prophet who was prepared to speak truth to power and confront evil, just as Elijah had done with the prophets of Baal⁵ and John the Baptist had done with Herod Antipas. The people, then, didn’t speak of Jesus as being “meek and mild,” as many would like to caricature him today, but as a prophet – one who spoke on behalf of God himself.

That’s a pretty good answer, you might think; but Jesus goes on to ask, “But who do *you* say that I am?”⁶ This is where Mark invites his readers to look back on where he has been taking them in their own discipleship journey. Having climbed that hill, he is turning around – so to speak - and looking down the valley to see if his readers are still following him. Peter responds, “You are *the Messiah*,” or, “You are *the Christ*” - to use the Greek equivalent. Please note, referring to Jesus as “the Messiah” *doesn’t* mean that he is calling him “divine,” or the second person of the Trinity; that comes later.⁷ In fact, most people today have no idea what “Messiah” means and when they say “Jesus Christ” they imagine “Christ” is his surname! But this a *title* and it has a different meaning to that of “prophet.” It means that you are “God’s Anointed One,” and *kingship* is implied.⁸ Yes, Jesus speaks authoritatively on God’s behalf, but the long-awaited Messiah had *political* connotations in first century Judaism,⁹ as being the rightful king of Israel in the royal line of the Great King David. And we need to remember *that* aspect in order to make sense of what happens next. However, Peter’s declaration that “You are the Christ!” is a *new* revelation.¹⁰ This is not something that you would *necessarily* infer from having observed and participated in the miracles of the previous chapters.

Mark tells us that after Peter’s insightful affirmation,¹¹ Jesus *began* to teach his disciples that the “Son

³ Mark 8:28. Actually, tradition has it that Elijah *never* died but was taken to God in a chariot of fire; 2 Kings 2:1-12.

⁴ See Mark 6:14-15.

⁵ 1 Kings 18. This took place on Mount Carmel.

⁶ Mark 8:29.

⁷ This does *not* mean that Mark did *not* think Jesus was divine, he most likely did; but that is not the real issue here!

⁸ In general, God anoints prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament; theologically, Jesus is all three!

⁹ This is also clear in the 2nd Temple (or “inter-Testamental”) literature not in the Protestant Bibles.

¹⁰ See also Mark 14:61–62.

¹¹ This affirmation by Peter is amplified in the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), with the powerful words of God (Mark 9:7b) echoing the words at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:11).

of Man” must *suffer*.¹² It is like a school teacher teaching math; only when the students have got the hang of addition and subtraction can you begin to explain multiplication and division. This is the first of Mark’s *three* repeated statements concerning Jesus’ coming death and resurrection.¹³ You see, the disciples were longing for a *king*, and they thought that in Jesus they had found one. Consequently, the disciples could make no sense whatsoever of the notion of a “suffering Messiah.” That was simply incomprehensible and unbelievable! All their lives they had thought of the Messiah in terms of an irresistible conqueror, and because of that, they had to face the uncomfortable reality that they may have spent all this time following a *false* prophet. Mark then says that Jesus did not speak in parables or riddles, but spoke openly about such things.¹⁴ He said, “the Son of Man *must* suffer and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts in law, that he *must* be killed and after three days rise again.”¹⁵ Jesus is stating plainly that following him should not be viewed as a risky political gamble that might just pay off; it would mean *certain* death. But note too that Mark emphatically links death *with resurrection* in his triple “predictions.”

You can’t help but notice that Jesus says he “*must*” suffer,¹⁶ or so Mark tells us, but with no explanation as to *why*. I would advise caution in reading too much into the word “must.” There is not a clear “theology of salvation” [or “atonement”] being articulated here. That arose later in church history, in light of *all* the New Testament documents and further theological reflection. It is, therefore, dangerous to say the “must” implies “divine predestination,” or that Jesus somehow foreknew the future.¹⁷ Everyone in those days knew that would-be Messiah’s always came to a sticky end by the authorities; no divine foreknowledge was needed. Nor does it mean that Jesus must die in order to *satisfy* God’s honour (as St. Anselm proposed) or divine justice (as John Calvin taught). These two notions for the “necessity” of the cross creates problems, not least because it creates too sharp a distinction between the God the Father and the Son, thus fragmenting the unity within the Trinity. Addressing the *meaning* in the death and resurrection is not Mark’s priority, and a much bigger topic for another occasion!¹⁸

¹² Mark 8:31. Jesus switches to the “Son of Man” title, rather than referring to himself as “Messiah”; but he does *not* reprimand Peter for call him that, or deny that he sees himself as the Messiah.

¹³ See Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34. In each of the passion “predictions,” Jesus will rise “after three days.” Matthew and Luke replace this with “on the third day” and there is abundant evidence in the LXX and other Jewish writings of these phrases have exactly the same meaning (e.g., Gen 42:17-18; Exod 19:11-16).

¹⁴ Mark 8:32.

¹⁵ Mark 8:31 (see footnote [12].) Notice that the rejection that brings about Jesus’ death is from the *Jewish* establishment.

¹⁶ Mark 8:31.

¹⁷ Incidentally, knowledge of one’s circumstances of one’s own death was deemed a sign of wisdom, or a gift of extraordinary persons, in the Greco Roman world.

¹⁸ But I leave you with this thought: An interesting alternative way of thinking about “must” is that the Son of Man *needs* to endure the depth of human pain in order to reconcile humanity with God. Jesus needs to bear the fullness of human experience, including suffering and death, in order for humanity to be brought into full communion with God. St Gregory the Theologian (or “of Nazianzus,” 329-390 AD) said “that which he has not assumed [or experienced], he did not heal.” According to this interpretation, Jesus’ suffering and death are not a “necessity” imposed from the *outside*, but an intrinsic necessity, the outworking of God’s decision to enter *into* and to *reclaim* the whole of human existence, including pain, suffering, and even death itself. Regardless, we must not overlook the fact that, for Mark, the “must” of the Son of Man suffering is *equally* applied to the *resurrection*!

Moving on: For Peter, the title “Messiah” excluded any possibility of suffering. Consequently, he takes Jesus aside and “rebukes” him. The Greek word for “rebuke” Mark uses here is same strong Greek word used for silencing demons! Peter appears to fall into the same trap as Jesus’ relatives, who earlier tried to restrain Jesus thinking he was “out of his mind”!¹⁹ As I said, Peter, like all the Jews of his day, thinks this whole notion of a suffering Messiah is insane; Jesus needs an intervention [even exorcising]! Jesus’ swift reaction, even calling Peter “Satan,”²⁰ is therefore appropriate, even if Peter’s intention was well-meaning. Furthermore, I think this mention of Satan is because *what* Peter was suggesting was a genuine temptation for Jesus. Mark does not give a detailed account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, as do Matthew and Luke.²¹ But Mark’s implication is that Jesus was victorious over Satan at that time, so “binding up the strong man,” as he mentions later,²² and that is why Jesus was able to exorcise demons. Nevertheless, the temptations that the Matthew and Luke mention correspond to being the dramatic Messiah the people longed for, one *without* the need for suffering. For some unstated reason, Jesus knew that was *not God’s way*.²³

Mark presents this whole conversation in the context of *journeying* with Jesus, not in the abstract but as part of the training his disciples. Jesus then widens this discussion to the crowds, and that includes both Mark’s readers and you and me. And what he says next are arguably some of the most unpopular words Jesus ever spoke.

First, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves* and *take up their cross* and follow me.”²⁴ When we hear the words “take up your cross” today, we think of those with a chronic condition or as having a disability, and there is an implied resignation that we “just have to live with it.” “Carrying our cross” is, then, a strange spiritual rationalization for the sufferer - or their care-giver; it has an air of pious fatalism about it, since it implies the burden we carry is somehow “God’s will.” That is bizarre because Jesus’ healings and his compassion for the crowds make it clear that God does *not* delight or desire human suffering!²⁵ That whole explanation is *not* how the disciples or Mark’s readers would have understood the phrase, “take up your cross.” Criminals and rebels were commonly crucified in the Roman world and they were required to literally carrying the wooden cross-beam of their own cross as they are being led to their own execution. This was part of a deliberate public shaming, and it was designed as a warning or deterrent to others. “If you truly want to be my disciple,” says Jesus, “you must be prepared to die, to be led out to a public execution, following my example.” Indeed, Mark’s readers may have been aware of the Christians crucified under Emperor Nero following the fire in Rome of 64 AD. Not every follower of Jesus did – or will - will face such a tortuous death, of course, but that

¹⁹ Mark 3:21.

²⁰ Mark 8:33. [The] “Satan” means “the adversary” in the OT, one who opposes what God desires.

²¹ Matt 4:1-11, and Luke 4:1-13.

²² Mark 3:27.

²³ Mark 8:33.

²⁴ Mark 8:34. See also Matt 10:39-39; 16:24-26 and Luke 9:23-27. Remember too that “martyr” is Greek for “witness.”

²⁵ In fact, God is working decisively to redeem a suffering creation in Jesus Christ, and that is part of the ongoing work of the Spirit and the church. It will be fully realised at the end of time, the eschaton.

is Christ's stark and honest warning. He is telling the crowds that he will *not* be a conquering, military Messiah leading to the political liberation of Israel. So, don't follow me under false pretenses just because of all the miracles you have witnessed.²⁶ The question today is will we still follow Jesus when he does not live up to *our own* personal hopes, expectations, or ambitions? Or when God doesn't answer our prayers in the way we would like?

Second, in addition to "take up your cross," Jesus also said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves . . .*"²⁷ Those words "deny yourselves" fall on deaf ears today. Mothers are understandably fed-up hearing such words, because they already have sacrificed themselves for their children and husbands and, in the process, many feel they have already lost their identities. Men are stereotypically too proud or self-reliant to consider the notion of self-denial. Moreover, those who are already so downtrodden in our society, for various reasons that are often outside of their control, won't take seriously the call to deny oneself, since they understandably feel they have already been "denied" so much. Furthermore, our affluent culture preaches that we should not deny ourselves any *thing* or *experience* we wish, "as long as it doesn't 'hurt' anyone else." But the problem is that fulfilling *that* desire *can* hurt others, even if that wasn't the primary intent. And that is because the "pursuit of happiness" is interpreted in a selfish, *individualistic* way today and not as a balanced, collective society. Christ's uncomfortable challenge, then, makes us think, "*What do we value in life?*" That is a very important question in a throwaway, consumer society. And do we value it enough to be willing to die for it? The underlying question, then, is are we prepared to "deny ourselves," even die, for something we believe in?

I was a university student when, one day, Britain woke up to the news that Argentina had invaded the Falkland Islands. Not realizing the little-known Falkland Islands were in the South Atlantic, many people wondered what on earth the Argentine navy was doing off the coast of Scotland! It wasn't long before Margaret Thatcher sent a military task force to reclaim that forgotten territory. It had been a long time since Britain had seen such direct military action and many people wondered if this was a cause worth dying for. The rise of nationalism as our prime loyalty means that we are meant to be prepared to die for our country whenever, and for whatever reason, our leaders choose to go to war. Canada is no stranger to American draft-dodgers during the Vietnam war; the rise of individualism has resulted in some young people being unwilling to die for the whim of our elected leaders. That does not mean some are not prepared to die for another cause they believe in. For example, some aid workers have been killed helping others abroad, and some journalists have given their lives to tell a news story. Such people are so passionate about a cause that we can even admire them. They live by the motto "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their very being, their life?"²⁸ They are

²⁶ God is doing a new thing in Jesus, who is *re-defining* what "Messiah" means. That seems to be Jesus' own understanding and it also how the gospel writers and the early church understood Jesus to be, in light of the resurrection.

²⁷ Mark 8:34. See also Matt 10:39-39; 16:24-26 and Luke 9:23-27. Remember too that "martyr" is Greek for "witness."

²⁸ Mark 8:36.

content to live rough, to sacrifice self-interest, to lack financial and physical “security” for what they believe in; missionaries have done the same.

There are, however, three further, short qualifications I need to make.

First, the call to “deny oneself” does not mean to relinquish the enjoyment of certain *things*, as though doing without or enduring suffering as such makes one holy. Nor does it mean to merely give up chocolate for Lent! To “deny” is the opposite of “to confess.” We are called to deny *ourselves* rather than deny Jesus, in other words, to no longer make oneself a top priority at the center of the universe.²⁹

Second, while it is a relief to know we are *not* to *seek* suffering; nevertheless, it is a warning that in following Jesus in any age we are to *expect* resistance because we live in societies whose values are, at times, contrary to those of God.³⁰ And there are consequences for speaking truth to power. Following Jesus seriously, then, will inevitably involve active public testimony, a time to courageously speak up and not be silent. Being a disciple is not simply a matter of showing individual kindness to others private.

Third, nor does this mean that God will rescue us from suffering “for the sake of the gospel.” But if we do suffer, we can be confident that God notices all such things, whether they are in the public eye or not, and they will be honoured on the Judgement Day, “when the Son of Man comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”³¹ From a post-resurrection perspective, we can *live* for a noble, God-honouring cause – for the kingdom of God – confident that death is *not* the end of reality. And if we try to hold on to life itself, thinking that the here and now is *all* we have, then we are in grave danger of missing the point, the meaning and purpose of life itself.

In conclusion, the words of Jesus are a challenge for all of us, as the church in every generation struggles not only to humbly *see* the world from God’s perspective, but to *live* accordingly in a world that thinks such a thing is madness. I began with a hike up a mountain; Mark has also taken us on a similar journey. Peter insightfully recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, Israel’s rightful king. Jesus reveals that he will suffer, be killed and after 3 days rise again. He is redefining the concept of Messiah. After this conversation (and the events of the next chapter), Jesus and his followers all know what lies ahead as they turn around at Caesarea Philippi and head toward Jerusalem in the distance. Will the crowds follow? Every one of us on our own journeys of discipleship will have a moment like that sooner or later. We will hear Jesus asking: “Who do *you* say that I am?” “Will you follow me, regardless?” “Will you confess and speak up for me and all that I stand for, or will you deny me?” “Will you put the kingdom of God before your own self-interest?” That Christ’s challenge for all of us here, both as individuals and as a congregation.

Let us pray.

²⁹ This reverses Adam’s decision to wanting to be his own God in Gen 3.

³⁰ Mark 8:38 speaks of “this adulterous and sinful generation.” See also Isaiah 1:4.

³¹ Mark 8:38b.