

Scripture Reading or Sunday February 28th 2021

Isaiah 53:4-6, 10 (NIV)

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

Mark 8:31-38 (NIV)

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: “Take Up Your Cross”

Without a doubt, today’s Lectionary passage from Mark’s gospel is a perfect choice for this season of Lent. However, that doesn’t make its contents easy for us to hear or understand. Today’s topic is certainly one some preachers might like to avoid. It will *not* result in popularity and it might well turn some people off. Even so, Mark’s account is repeated in Matthew and Luke,¹ and that means it is not a whim of Mark we can choose to ignore. I think the best way to approach this difficult text is like eating a juicy hamburger, a bite at a time!

Mark tells us that Jesus *began* to teach his disciples that the “Son of Man” must *suffer*.² This is the first of Mark’s *three* repeated statements concerning Jesus’ coming death and resurrection.³ 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 Messiah who suffers, the kind that we heard about in our Old Testament reading.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷

You can’t help but notice that Jesus says he “*must*” suffer - or so Mark tells us - but with no explanation as to *why*. This may well be an allusion to Isaiah 53 verse 4 where the suffering servant, *so the author thinks*, is being “punished *by God*,” or later, in verse 10 where it says, “It was *the LORD’s will* to crush him and *cause* him to suffer.” Despite such seemingly explicit texts, I would advise *strong* caution here!⁸

¹ Matt 16:13-28; Luke 9:18-27. (Luke’s version omits Peter rebuking Jesus and Jesus’ powerful response.)

² Mark 8:31. Jesus switches to the “Son of Man” title, rather than referring to himself as “Messiah” (Mark 8:29-30); but he does *not* reprimand Peter for calling him that, or deny that he sees himself as the Messiah.

³ 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). Repeating something three times is a sign of emphatic importance in the Bible.

⁴ I suggest that when Jesus later explains the “must suffer” (e.g., Luke 24:25-27), it is by drawing attention to overlooked texts on the suffering servant in Isaiah.

⁵ Mark 8:32.

⁶ Mark 8:31 (see [2].) Notice that the rejection that brings about Jesus’ death is from the *Jewish* establishment; Mark 3:6. What irony! What a tragedy. What a warning for the *Christian* establishment today . . .

⁷ I believe this is important because Mark’s ending seems abrupt and doesn’t present a resounding resurrection account. Some have suggested that ending was deliberate, others that Mark was interrupted or that the ending has been lost. Regardless of such speculation, Mark makes emphatic reference to the resurrection *three* times in these passion predictions.

⁸ God was deemed the source of *good and evil* in many (early) parts of the Old Testament. Yet Satan is usually deemed the source of *opposition* to God’s reign in the New Testament. I suggest a coherent theology was not yet formalised and so such texts need to be interpreted with caution. Moreover, invoking divine *predestination* is not wise or helpful here!

Even if Mark thought that a sovereign God was *directing* events and so Messiah Jesus *must* suffer, that conclusion is made with the hindsight of the resurrection. Even so, this image is still deeply troubling because of *how* of depicts the *character* of God. A God who *imposes* suffering is one we find hard to worship, let alone *love*. Let me therefore present what I think is a better way of viewing this difficult text. What is inevitable is that the boundless love of God *must* collide with a world whose values are so different from God's own. That said, remember it was purely *human* decisions that resulted in the violence of the scourging and the crucifixion of Jesus. That's because the kingdom of God that Jesus introduces - one that is characterized by justice, forgiveness, and peace - challenges *our* world's power structures, and so should be no surprise that Jesus was subject to violence because those in power earnestly desire to maintain tight control of their authority.⁹ Put a different way, everyone in those days knew that would-be-Messiah's *always* were always killed by the authorities; no divine foreknowledge was needed.¹⁰ God does *not*, then, *manipulate* or *control* humans to *make* this outcome occur - and I believe this explanation is one that preserves God's good character.¹¹

Moving on: Peter's understanding of "Messiah" *excluded* any possibility of suffering. Consequently, he takes Jesus aside and "rebukes" him. The Greek word for "rebuke" that Mark uses here is same strong Greek word used for silencing demons!¹² As I said earlier, Peter, like all the Jews of his day, thinks this whole notion of a suffering Messiah is insane; Jesus needs an intervention! Jesus' swift reaction, even calling Peter "Satan,"¹³ is therefore appropriate, even if Peter's intention was well-meaning. Why such strong language here? 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.¹⁴ But Mark's implication is that Jesus was victorious over Satan at that time and that was why Jesus was able to exorcise demons.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the temptations that the Matthew and Luke mention correspond to being the popular Messiah that the people longed for, one who would *not* suffer. For some unstated reason, Jesus knew that was *not* God's way.¹⁶

After that private teaching moment with the disciples, Mark re-introduces the crowds and we get a series of troubling statements on what it means to *follow* Jesus – to be his disciple. Let's take another bite of that juicy burger, if we still have the stomach for it!

⁹ Adapted from Theologian Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p189. Recent US politics also attends to that fact!

¹⁰ See Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34. Nor does it mean that Jesus *must* die in order to *satisfy* God's *honor* (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.

¹¹ And preserves human freewill, a gift in creation and one that is a feature of being made in the "image of God," Gen 1:26.

¹² Peter appears to fall into the same trap as Jesus' relatives, who earlier tried to restrain Jesus thinking he was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21).

¹³ Mark 8:33. [The] "Satan" means "the adversary" in the OT, one who opposes what God desires.

¹⁴ Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13.

¹⁵ So "binding up the strong man," as Jesus mentions later in Mark 3:22-27. Mark's gospel stresses Jesus as exorcist.

¹⁶ Mark 8:33.

First, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”¹⁷ When we hear the words “take up your cross” today, we often 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!¹⁸ 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 and 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. Moreover, I suggest Mark’s readers are being encouraged to *endure* here, given he was writing at the time of war and destruction in Jerusalem. Mercifully, not every follower of Jesus did – or will - face such dire hardships, of course, but that 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.¹⁹ 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 . . .”²⁰ Those words “deny yourselves” fall on deaf ears today – even in Lent! Mothers are understandably fed-up hearing such words, because many think they already have sacrificed themselves for their families and, in the process, feel they have lost their freedom and part of their identities. 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.²¹ I get all that and I certainly don’t want to beat up people who are already hurting this morning! Context matters! I suggest Christ’s uncomfortable challenge asks us to think about the overlooked “big” questions, such as: “*What* do we

¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ 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. This also conflicts with the earlier “must suffer.”

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Mark 8:34. See this hard teaching in the context of Mark 14:50-52, which some have interpreted as a personification of the church! I suggest we need this text along side of Matt 11:28-30.

²¹ Men are stereotypically too proud or self-reliant to consider the notion of self-denial! Furthermore, our affluent culture preaches that we should *not* deny ourselves any *experience* or *thing* 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.

value in life?” That is still a very important question in our 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,” for something we believe in?²² Put a different way, what authentic, lasting good is achieved for someone “to gain the whole world,” yet in the process lose their integrity?²³

There are two 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 ourselves the center of the universe.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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. When that happens, we can be confident that God notices all such things, and they will be honored on the Judgement Day, when – as Mark puts it – “the Son of Man comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”²⁶ From a post-resurrection perspective, we can *live* 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 very meaning and purpose of life itself.

In conclusion, having eaten this juicy burger, we may be experiencing indigestion! These 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. As we journey on through Lent, remember that Mark is also taking us on a similar journey. Jesus reveals that he *will* suffer, be killed, and after 3 days rise again. He is therefore *redefining* the concept of Messiah. After this conversation, Jesus and his followers all know what lies ahead as they now head toward Jerusalem. 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: “What are *your* expectations of me?” “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.

²² See Mark 8:35.

²³ See Mark 8:36. Well-deserved reputations can be easily lost, not *just* by politicians – consider Ravi Zacharias.

²⁴ This reverses Adam’s decision to wanting to be his own God in Gen 3.

²⁵ Mark 8:38 speaks of “this adulterous and sinful generation.” See also Isaiah 1:4, and recall the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness. Moreover, this verse clearly has eschatological consequences.

²⁶ Mark 8:38b.