

The way of the cross

Today's reading from Mark's gospel began with the words "[Jesus] then began to teach them ..." – so it's tied to what happened immediately before.

And what happened is a hugely significant moment in Mark's gospel. Reading from verse 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?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him."

Jesus admits he's the messiah... or maybe confirms he's the messiah. There's lots of speculation about who Jesus is, then Peter says to him "You are the Messiah".

Jesus effectively answers Peter "Yes, but don't tell anyone".

And then, at the start of today's gospel reading, "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, ... and be killed ... and rise again"

[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer ... be rejected ... killed and after three days rise again.

I think we get used to knowing the story of Jesus. You know the baby in Bethlehem, the baptism in the Jordan, the calling of his disciples, the teaching, the healing and so on. And of course his betrayal, death and resurrection. We know all these details – we might struggle to remember all the details or the right order... but the central message of Christianity is that Jesus died. That Jesus died to reconcile us to God. That Jesus died as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And we know that he rose again on the third day.

If we've been coming to church for a while, we will have picked up those basics. We can't really not know those things.

But sometimes we miss that the disciples didn't know those things.

Those things had been prophesied, of course, but the disciples didn't know. They were fishermen, mostly - not theologians. And even if they had heard those prophecies, they probably wouldn't have understood. We can understand them because of Jesus, and crucially, because the Holy Spirit dwells in us.

And so what Jesus told them would have come as bit of a shock. "Yes, I am the messiah, but I'm going to have to die. Yes, I am the one that the whole nation of Israel has been waiting for, but I'm not going to lead them to victory over Rome, rather, they're going to reject me."

It would have been a bit of a disappointment.

And so Peter, who may not have been the smartest disciple, nor the wisest disciple, but is recorded as the one most likely to speak up, took Jesus aside and rebuked him. And given all

that we know about Peter, that's quite a measured response – he usually just blurted things out. This time, though, he took Jesus aside, and rebuked him.

We can only imagine what he might have said: “No! You don't have to do that! You can cast out demons and heal the sick and miraculously feed thousands, and you can walk on water, and you can calm storms... surely you can save yourself!”

How does Jesus respond to Peter's rebuke? He says “Get behind me, Satan!”

That's a bit rough, isn't it? ... Peter had good intentions, didn't he? He was just looking out for Jesus, wasn't he?

“Get behind me, Satan!”

I think to properly understand why Jesus said that, we need to go back to earlier in the gospel. The first mention of Satan in Mark's gospel is in Mark 1:13 where we read that Jesus “was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

But that's all that Mark tells us – that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. But if we turn to the gospels of Matthew and Luke we get a fuller picture of how Jesus was tempted.

Matthew tells us that the devil presented three escalating temptations to Jesus: Firstly, to turn stones into bread because he was hungry.

Secondly, to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels catch him.

Thirdly, to become king of the world, if only he bowed down and worshipped Satan.

And the three temptations aren't bad things: Food, rescue, and world peace.

They would have been easy - no betrayal, no suffering, no dying.

But it would have come at a terrible cost – following Satan rather than God.

Jesus, of course we know, resisted each temptation, and he responded to the last one by saying (Matt 3:10) “Away with you Satan!”

And so, when Peter took Jesus aside and said to him “No, no, you don't have to be rejected. You don't have to die. You can save yourself...”

It goes back to that last temptation in the wilderness.

Peter is, perhaps unwittingly, tempting Jesus just as the devil had done.

And so Jesus says to him “Get behind me, Satan!”

And then he explains “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Peter's reaction is a natural one. It is a very human one.

And of course, Peter's expectation that Jesus could save himself wouldn't have been unique. And I suspect that that is a major reason that Jesus didn't want to be publicly identified as the messiah – because people would have expected him to save not only himself, but the whole nation. And probably deliver God's vengeance on those who were outside God's chosen people.

That was the messiah they wanted, but not the messiah they needed. And not the messiah that God sent.

So Jesus called all his followers around him, and he set them straight on what following him really means. It's not marching to victory as the world knows it. It's not accumulating wealth and power. It's not even physical safety.

Verse 34-35: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Under Roman rule, convicted criminals would often have to carry their cross to their place of execution. It would have been an image to which the people Jesus was speaking to could relate.

Followers of Jesus are asked to deny themselves, and give everything – their life and even their death – to God. If you don't carry the cross, if you throw it away, you're still going to die. So you need to trust Jesus with everything. Life and death.

If we try and save ourselves, we'll fail. Jesus said it plainly: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it". But if we follow Jesus – even to the point of death, then we will be saved. "but whoever loses their life for me" says Jesus "and for the sake of the gospel will save it".

So even if you die, you're going to be okay. Even if the worst happens, you're going to be okay.

New life, everlasting life, eternal life is with God. And the way to that life is through Jesus. Through following Jesus. Other ways of trying to preserve our lives are doomed.

"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Power doesn't last forever. Wealth doesn't last forever. Even fame doesn't last forever.

You know the parable of the rich fool? *"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."* (Luke 12:16-21)

Or from the sermon on the mount: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:19-21)

While wealth may not always be a barrier to following God (cf Matthew 19:23-26), it can be an obstacle, and its often a distraction. It's a matter of priorities and of ensuring that wealth – or the pursuit of wealth – doesn't become an idol for us.

Rich people have done great things for those in need, great things for the world, and even great things for the gospel. And we shouldn't fail to acknowledge that.

But for many, the pursuit of wealth, the pursuit of power, the pursuit of privilege has taken priority and their lives have been corrupted.

Jesus says, though: "what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

I'm a fan of The Princess Bride and there's a scene in that where Inigo Montoya has come face to face with Count Rugen, the six-fingered man who killed his father.

"Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die"

Inigo has the count pinned to the wall, and the count tries to bargain for his life

"No!" he says.

"Offer me money" says Inigo.

"Yes!" says the Count.

"And power too, promise me that." demands Inigo.

"All that I have and more.... Please" says the count.

"Offer me everything I ask for".

"Anything you want!" pleads Rugen.

And Inigo says "I want my father back".

And runs him through.

The Count, for all his wealth and power and connections, couldn't save his life.

That's an extreme and fictional case.... But it does ring true. We hear of people in times of tragedy, bargaining with God. "God if you save me in this lightning storm I'll go into the ministry", "God, if you just get my child through this operation, I'll go to church every week", "God, if you.... Then I will..."

But Jesus asks "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

It's not wealth nor power nor connections.

What people need to give in return for their lives is back in verses 34 and 35 "Let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.... those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

It's that simple. And it's that hard.

If you want everlasting life, then follow Jesus. Be born again or born from above as Jesus says in John's gospel. Follow the ways of Jesus, rather than the ways of the world.

But then Jesus says "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."

We mustn't be embarrassed by our faith, and following Jesus isn't something that we can do in secret. That doesn't mean we need to be standing on street corners wearing sandwich boards and quoting scripture, and it doesn't mean that we need to be doorknocking to invite people to church, and it doesn't mean we need to go to overseas mission fields.

But if we are really followers of Jesus, then it will show. If we get to know God better and love him more then it will show in our lives – it will show in our characters. And we needn't be those stereotypical wowsers Christians who say tut-tut a lot, disapprove of most things and seem to have no fun at all.

The fruits of the spirit include happiness and joy. The gospel is literally 'good news' – it is good. Even in the darkest times, we, as followers of Jesus, have hope – and not a vague possibility of things working out for us, but the sure and certain hope of life through him, in the new creation.

Our reading this morning began with Jesus teaching the disciples that the Son must undergo suffering, rejection and death. But we can look back on that knowing what Jesus accomplished through those things, and how what he accomplished was confirmed in his resurrection.

That was God's plan. And Jesus knew that was God's plan... but Peter didn't understand. He had other ideas about what Jesus should do, despite being one of the first to recognise Jesus as the messiah.

We need to make sure that whatever we do, we are following God's plan. Not choosing the ways of the world over the ways of God, and not just choosing the easiest or cheapest way – or the way of least conflict.

No matter how much we try, we can't save ourselves. Jesus said: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it". But if we follow Jesus, then we're going to be okay. Even if the worst happens, we're going to be okay.

Jesus' death leads to our everlasting life. There is no other way.

Amen