

Having God's Ways in Mind – a sermon by Richard Shreeve for Sunday 28 February 2021

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord." May hearts and minds be open to receive and act on your word. Amen

The Gospel of Mark hinges on a climactic turning point. After Jesus spends 8 chapters doing miracles that only the Son of God would do, the disciples finally figure out who he is. While other Israelites thought he was a special prophet like Jeremiah or Elijah, Peter proclaimed in Mark 8:29, "You are the Messiah." That identification changes the direction and content of Mark's Gospel.

Everything leading up to Mark 8:29 is designed to reveal who Jesus is, but everything afterwards redefines what the disciples think about the Messiah. Jesus immediately begins to correct their assumptions about what the Messiah will do. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again". Jesus had to teach them about his torturous destiny over and over again (Mark 9:12, 31-32; 10:33-34). Why? Because the disciples already thought the Messiah would kill all the bad guys, not get killed by them. When Jesus told the disciples that the Jewish hierarchy would kill him, Peter took him aside and rebuked Jesus (Mark 8:32). Peter didn't think Jesus knew what he was talking about. If Jesus was the Messiah, his destiny wasn't death but autocracy. God was going to give him victory over foreign nations and sinful insiders so that he could reign supreme over an independent Jewish nation on earth. That's why John and James ask for the privileged positions of sitting at the right and left sides of his throne when God crowns Jesus the king (Mark 10:35-37)

The disciples had expectations for the Messiah because Jews had been talking about it for years. They had blended God's prophetic promises with nationalistic ambition. They were already so certain about the Messiah's unstoppable political establishment that they were ready to rebuke Jesus for thinking otherwise. That belief was rooted in powerful Jewish voices that have been preserved to this day in Greek translations of ancient Hebrew texts.

Maybe Peter didn't say anything we haven't thought or even wanted to say.

Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of us probably want. When another's reality and vision begin to conflict with and overtake our own, we rebuke them. We take them aside to enlighten them, help them understand, show them the error of their ways. That's all Peter did.

If we are really honest, haven't we, at some point, disagreed with Jesus, asking why he doesn't do what we want? Why won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

If he can heal Peter's mother-in-law, why not those we love?

If he can cleanse the leper, why does our life sometimes leave us feeling unclean and isolated?

If he can make the paralytic walk, why are so many crippled by fear, dementia, or addiction?

If he can calm the sea, surely he could calm the storms of our world. Yet they rage on; violence, war, poverty?

If he can keep Jairus' daughter from dying, why not our children, our friends, our loved ones?

If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and pieces of bread, why does much of the world go to bed hungry?

I have wondered about these things and I have been asked these kinds of questions. I know some who have lost faith and left the Church over these things. These are our rebukes of Jesus. He is not being or acting like we want. Sometimes his words challenge and shock us.

Isaiah 55 v8-9 tells us, “For **my** thoughts are **not your** thoughts, neither are **your ways my ways,**” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are **higher than** the earth, so are **my ways.** Maybe we’re not so different from Peter.

Just a few verses before today’s gospel Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter names him as “the Christ,” the Messiah, the Anointed one of God. Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one for whom Israel has waited, the one who was supposed to restore God’s people. Peter is right and yet he also does not understand.

Peter has an image of what the Messiah is supposed to do and who the Messiah is supposed to be. We all have our own images and wishes about who Jesus is and what he should do. All is well when Jesus is casting out demons, healing the sick, preventing death, and feeding the multitudes. We like that Jesus. We want to follow that Jesus. He is our Lord and Saviour.

Jesus will not, however, conform to our images of who we think he is or who we want him to be. Instead, he asks us to conform to who he knows himself to be: the one who “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” He sets a choice before us. It is a choice we each have to make. Again and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We either choose ourselves and deny Jesus or we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. “If any want to become my followers,” he says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Self-denial is the beginning of discipleship. I suspect that is not what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Jesus’ words are hard and his way extreme. Surely God did not covenant with his people and bring them out of Egypt into the promised land only to say, “Now let it all go.” The Messiah is supposed to offer security, protection, and put Israel back on top. Faith in Jesus, Peter is learning, is not about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life, and the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what Jesus is doing and he expects nothing less of those who would follow him.

The way of Christ, self-denial, reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God. It reminds us that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us. It is about God. There is great freedom in knowing these things. We are free to be fully alive. Through self-denial our falling down becomes rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

As long as we believe our life is about us, we will continue to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. Self-denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

Jesus chose to give in a world that takes, to love in a world that hates, to heal in a world that injures, to give life in a world that kills. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance, forgiveness when others condemned, and compassion when others were indifferent. He trusted God’s abundance when others said there was not enough. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point those kinds of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. They will not deny themselves. They will respond. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self-denial. When it happened for Jesus, he made one last choice. He chose resurrection over survival. Which will you choose? Amen