

## Sermon for Lent 2, Year B

### The Text: Mark 8:31-38

In Mark 1 – Jesus dodges the crowds who were waiting to be healed. Healing is important but preaching is more important. Then he heals a man with leprosy and says, 'Keep it quiet'.

In Mark 5 – Jesus raises a young girl from the dead. He makes everyone but her family leave first, then orders the family not to tell anyone. 'Keep it to yourself'.

In Mark 7 – A man who cannot hear or speak is brought to Jesus. Jesus takes him away from the crowds, heals him and tells the people, 'Don't tell anyone. Keep it to yourself'. But they don't. Instead they go and tell everyone, "How well he does everything. He even causes the deaf hear and the mute to speak"

In Mark 8 – Jesus asks his disciples who the people think he is. They've seen his miracles, they've heard his preaching. The demons know – they've been crying out 'You are the Son of God' but Jesus has been making them be quiet. Surely the people should know who he is by now. But the disciples say, "*Some think you are John the Baptist, some say you are Elijah, and others say you are one of the prophets.*"

So Jesus puts it to his disciples and says, "*What about you? Who do you say that I am?*" And Peter gets it right, "*You are the Messiah*". So how do you think Jesus responds? Yes – you've got it. Go and tell everyone? Go and make disciples of all nations. No, he says 'Keep it quiet'.

The problem is that people are recognising that Jesus is the Christ but their picture of the Christ is not complete. The disciples believe Jesus is the Messiah, the people are getting close but none of them have the full picture yet. So Jesus tells everyone to keep it quiet because he has something very important to tell them about what it means to be the Messiah – something that people will miss if they just focus on the miracles that he does.

So Jesus makes it plain to his disciples. Our reading today said that Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man 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.

The cross is the missing piece that no one yet knows about. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection are the things that will make him the true Christ, the true Saviour. That is why he has come. Any path that Jesus wants to walk that avoids the cross will be a short cut – a short cut that will not be sufficient to bring peace between God and humanity.

Not surprisingly Peter doesn't like what he hears and he rebukes Jesus. "Suffering and death? Jesus, you must be out of your mind! You are the Christ, surely that won't happen to you." Peter doesn't know it but he's asking Jesus to take a short cut. It's the same kind of short cut that Jesus was offered in the desert when he was tempted by Satan. 'Turn these stones to bread – that will startle the people and make them believe' 'Jump off the temple and God will stop you from falling. He wouldn't want you to get hurt, would he? 'I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world. Just bow down and worship me.'

The short cuts have been offered before. No wonder Jesus return serve with Peter and says to him, "Get behind me Satan!" Peter's thoughts, Satan's thoughts, human thoughts – they all want to take a short cut. They all want to avoid the cross.

It struck me as I looked over the chapters that lead up to today's story just how simple and consistent Jesus' message had been. "Turn away from your sins and believe the good news" was his message after his baptism. When he sent his disciples out to tell the people anything they told the people to turn away from their sins. And Jesus says the same thing to us today. "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

If you want to save your life there is no short cut. There is only the cross. Defending yourself, protecting yourself, justifying yourself will prove futile. Your life will not be saved. But denying yourself, admitting your fault and your need for forgiveness, handing yourself in will mean you will be saved. That is the cross we have been asked to take.

Repentance and self-denial – that's called the way of the cross. And along that way there are no short cuts. Painful as our cross may be, our cross is different to Jesus' cross. It might hurt our pride to ask for forgiveness. It might take extreme courage to admit we are wrong. But that personal pain is hardly anything compared to the real pain of nails driven through your hands and feet, of your back being lashed with cords, of hanging on a cross in agony, of the piercing of your side with a spear.

Jesus died in our place. His cross was physical, ours is not. Maybe our cross is a bit of a shortcut after all.

Something to remember is that Jesus' cross, his suffering and death, appeared to be a failure. It seemed that Jesus had lost and that the powers of darkness had won the day. But in truth it was completely the opposite. The cross was Jesus' great victory, when he defeated sin and the power of the devil. No one realized that, of course, until Easter Sunday, when the victory was completed over not only sin and the power of the devil but over death as well.

And your cross is a victory too. Remember what Jesus said to Peter? "Get behind me Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." The whole world is wired in the same way – wired for defeat, born sinful and ready to defend ourselves to the end. But every time you repent, every time the Holy Spirit moves you to deny yourself, take up your cross and seek God's grace then God has won a massive victory in you. For God to get you to deny your human thoughts and inclination and repent then he must have filled you with the thoughts of Jesus himself. To everyone else it must look like a capitulation, a sign of weakness, complete surrender. But the cross is victory, a triumph disguised to look like failure.

You are followers of Jesus and he has called you take up your cross. As you do, you receive the spoils of victory won by Jesus – forgiveness of sins, eternal life and peace with God. That's the message of the cross. And that's the message of the Messiah. Now that we have the full picture – don't keep it to yourselves.