

Sermon for Lent 2, Year B The Text: Mark 8:31-38

Is your faith at the crossroads?

To be at the crossroads is a figurative term, meaning that we have arrived at a critical intersection in life where the direction chosen will have profound consequences for the future, just like arriving at an unmarked or unknown intersection and having to decide which way to go.

"Is your faith at the crossroads?" That could well be a question Mark's Gospel poses for us today. The disciples were at the crossroads that day when Jesus taught them that it was necessary for him to suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Up until this point there has been a breath-taking succession of miracles in which Jesus' divine powers are on display. He had cast out evil spirits, miraculously healed lepers, the blind, the deaf, and the chronically ill, and exercised mastery over creation. Jesus has triumphed over every opposition, even showing that he has authority over death itself, with the raising of Jairus' daughter. Just before today's text, they had just confessed Jesus to be the Christ.

How suddenly they had arrived at the cross-roads! Jesus makes the astonishing claim that he must suffer and die, one that smacks of failure, defeat, and compromise of God's mission. How can suffering and death possibly happen to the One who is the agent of salvation? How can Jesus succumb to the very forces that he's just overcome? Surely there will be peace for Israel and earthly grandeur and triumph for Jesus, certainly not terrible suffering and being killed!

For Peter, things really seem to be at the crossroads—if Jesus goes ahead with whatever crazy plan he has, it will be the end of him! What's he thinking!?!? So Peter wants to set things straight. It's not too hard to picture him putting his arm around Jesus, gently ushering him aside and speaking firmly in his ear—our text says that Peter *rebuked* him. We don't know exactly what words, but in effect perhaps something like: "Um...Jesus, let's just get things straight. You're the Messiah. Messiahs don't suffer. Messiahs don't die. Messiahs take control. Messiahs are victorious!"

But Jesus gives a rebuke of his own to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan, for you do not care about the things of God but the things of men!" And having called the crowd with his disciples he said to them: *"If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life on account of me and the Gospel will save it. For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world but to have lost their soul? Or what can anyone pay for their soul?"*

Peter has to deny himself—deny his understanding, plans and schemes of what should transpire next. He has to deny his own reason and listen to what Jesus has just said: that Jesus must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise up. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that this was the very way that Jesus did triumph. The cross was Jesus' throne where he conquered sin, death and the demonic realm before triumphing with the greatest miracle ever: rising from the dead. Jesus has to go to the cross. It is necessary that he experience the valley of the shadow of death so that he can die the death that should have been ours.

Jesus must die. But what's more, Jesus calls those who follow him to die as well. He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them: "If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life on account of me and the Gospel will save it". Jesus is not only talking about his own suffering and death but now talking about all of his followers losing his lives! It's in this context that Jesus talks about bearing our crosses. This metaphor of taking up one's own cross is not to be made into an exhortation merely to endure any kind of suffering patiently. Often we talk about "everyone having a cross to bear" when we think about those who are ill or having some kind of trouble in their life.

Jesus isn't meaning this at all. He is talking about taking up our cross and following him. He carried his own cross as he walked to Golgotha to be crucified. To die. When Jesus is talking about us taking up our cross and following him, he is calling us to follow him to death too. To die to ourselves. Which is nothing other than what daily living in our baptism means, just as Paul says in Romans 6:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Luther says this means that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil desires, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that a new person should arise daily to live in righteousness with God forever.

That's what Jesus means by denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him. Jesus is not merely calling us to endure discomfort, but to put to death that within us which is in complete contradiction to God's love; that which is inconsistent with what he commands. *"If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves, take up their Cross and follow me"*.

Dying doesn't sound so good, does it? All of a sudden, then, we are at the crossroads. Maybe we should skip over this text and fast forward ahead to next week. But Jesus won't have it. Like Peter we are challenged by Jesus to make an either/or decision: who is to be your Lord and master? Is it to be yourself or is it to be Christ? Jesus goes on to say: *"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life on account of me and the Gospel will save it."* We're there at the cross roads. It doesn't sound a popular message. A life without carrying the cross seems very attractive.

But if you stop and think about it, so can dying to the self and following Jesus. For what does that look like? It means letting God be God over our whole lives, rather than the parts of the lives we invite him to be. It means no longer running to the idols we cling to for comfort whenever we are anxious or hurting. It means freely forgiving others rather than using our anger in the wrong way by clinging to bitterness and un-forgiveness. It means no longer comparing ourselves to others or trying to win their approval but comparing ourselves to Christ and resting in the approval God already has for us in him. It means no longer trying to justify harmful thoughts, actions, or things we do or failed to do but handing them over to him as we rest under God's Word. It means choosing to be gracious and compassionate to others because everyone needs grace and compassion. It means speaking well of everyone in the kindest way possible so that reputations and emotions are not damaged.

Today, Jesus stands with us at the cross-roads. Are we going to follow him? Are we going to live according to every word that comes from the mouth of God, or only those that don't trouble us too much or place heavy demands upon us?

Jesus' challenge to us to take up our cross and find our life by losing it is a heavy demand. It is hard law. But the good news is that Jesus has done it for us. The good news is that his cross is the very power to do what we would otherwise be powerless to do ourselves. Let us all say that our faith *is* at the cross roads—walking on the road under the shadow of Jesus' cross, as he takes us by the hand. As we follow him we walk behind the One who carried his cross for our sakes. Only his cross-bearing can empower the cross-bearing he calls us to endure. Only his death and resurrection can enable us to die to the old Adam in us and rise to new life. As he brings his death and resurrection to life in us personally through his word and sacraments we are indeed freed to lose the world and its ways and even our own as Jesus strengthens us in faith and living that faith out in loving service to others.

It is for this very reason that Jesus came into the world. No one can give anything in exchange for their soul. No one except God, who paid the price to make you his very own, alone, by giving up his only Son. He took up his cross, walked to Golgotha and was crucified so that his shed blood would purify and free you from all your sins. He joined you to his death and resurrection in your baptism, where he washed you clean and forgave you all your sin, poured out His Holy Spirit on you to give new birth and to consecrate you for life and service with Him. Rejoice that you are at the crossroads. For everyone who bears their cross is marked by it as a follower of Jesus and everyone who follows to the Cross follows also to the empty tomb and the ascension into heaven, where riches greater than all the earthly kingdoms await you from your Heavenly Father. Amen.