

The Way of the Cross (Mark 8: 27-38)

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

31 Then he 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

We're in Lent, and so we're jumping a chapter in order to "do" Mark's Easter story. Here, at the midpoint of Mark's gospel, we have Peter's confession, the passion predictions, and Jesus' startling response to Peter.

Caesarea Philippi: when Jesus and the disciples begin to part company

The incident at Caesarea Philippi is often seen as a turning point in the gospel – the moment when Peter "gets it". "You are the Messiah, the Christ!" he proclaims. This is often portrayed as Peter's epiphany. Midway through his ministry, when his disciples have been with him and experienced the healings and miracles, when they

have heard him and spent days and nights with him, month after month, Jesus says, “Ok guys. You’ve seen it all, heard it all, shared it all; now, what do you make of it? Who do you reckon I am?” And Peter, on this reading, gets it right. He “sees” – just like the blind man Jesus healed in the previous verses at Bethsaida.

If only that were true! Wouldn’t it be nice? Wouldn’t it be good to know that Jesus, just beginning to face the way of the cross ahead, is surrounded by staunch allies – people who share his ministry and mission, his understanding of God’s kingdom and his priorities? Wouldn’t it be good to know that he was among friends – even if there were only twelve of them?

Yes, it would be – but that’s not what Mark gives us! Why do we actually even expect that? Well, probably because we more easily remember Matthew’s version of the confession (Matthew 16: 13ff). And probably because we *want* it to be like that. Most of all, though, because it’s the way *we* operate: “Get our theology right, and that’s it!” As long as we get the technical terms right (in this case, recognising that Jesus is the Messiah), then we’re being faithful followers.

But then we’re really shocked when Jesus turns to Pete and calls him “Satan”! How can Peter go from saint to Satan in 4 short verses? That’s precisely the sort of shock Mark intends to administer, because he wants to startle us out of our complacency that we “know” Jesus and that it’s enough to “get our theology right”. We *should* have been prepared for it. Our antennae should have gone up the moment we saw that Caesarea Philippi follows immediately on the heels of the healing of a blind man. We should know Mark’s style by now: he’s ironic. We should expect precisely the fact that the *disciples* will fail to “see”. And that is what happens.

Far from presenting Jesus surrounded by friends as he begins the journey to the cross, Mark begins the narrative of the disintegration of the disciples. This is the group who will have abandoned and denied Jesus; who will have turned their backs on their friend and master in his greatest need. This is the group who will be Jesus’ closest opponents of the way of the cross and who will most actively seek to

dissuade him from his course. The point is that the disciples can neither understand nor accept Jesus' version of messiahship because it involves the cross.

“Messiah”

“Who do *you* say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples. They've already reported the word on the grapevine: Jesus is John the Baptist (come back to life); or Elijah. The point here is that John is presented as an Elijah figure – the great prophet who was expected as the herald of “the great and terrible Day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5).

Peter says more than that: he calls Jesus the Messiah – the culmination of all that God planned and promised. And he's right. Jesus *is* the Messiah. So why is Jesus' immediate response to shut Peter and the others up? He “sternly ordered” them not to tell *anyone* about him. “Sternly ordered” is very strong. Think Mafia threats to keep quiet and you're at the right sort of level of seriousness (though not, presumably, right about the content!).

This is the “messianic secrecy” motif, a narrative device identified by Wrede. That is not to suggest that its roots do not go back to Jesus himself. The point that Mark makes is that Jesus is in the business of *redefining* messiahship. He *is* the messiah, but the dominant messianic categories – political liberator of Israel, royal Davidic figure and/or spectacular miracle-worker – don't fit Jesus' mission.

That is a different “way” of being messiah – a different path and a different destination. Jesus' way is the way of the cross. That is why, in the very next verse, Jesus goes on to teach them about the forthcoming passion. It follows perfectly logically from the command to silence when we understand it as an *explanation* for his concern that the disciples don't go around saying, “Hey, everybody! Listen up! This is the messiah!”

The passion predictions lay out Jesus' messianic agenda: suffering and death. This is not a “way” calculated to win friends and disciples! “He said all this quite openly”, Mark tells us. In other words, he's saying, “Jesus couldn't have been clearer. He laid

it out clearly – on the line. There could be no mistaking what he was saying. There was no “wriggle-room”!” Peter doesn’t even try to wriggle! He grabs Jesus, takes him aside, and lays the law down.

Imagine the conversation. It’s at least, “Look, Jesus, just forget all that death and suffering stuff! What’s wrong with you? You’ve got *power*! You’re a hit! You can feed crowds of people, cast out demons, heal people. Just imagine how they’ll flock to you! You want followers? Jesus, you could raise a standing army at the click of your fingers. *We’re* with you! Israel – no, the *world!* – is yours for the taking! Think of it, Jesus: king of the world! What couldn’t you do? And how much good couldn’t you do? Why, these people will worship you as a god! So cut this other ‘suffering and death’ nonsense out!”

"Get behind me, Satan!"

Let’s not forget: in order for the promised world of the Kingdom of God to come, the world created and maintained by the Roman Empire has to go. As we have seen, Jesus rejects the way of and armed insurrection. His mission is to sow the seed of the Kingdom – the promise, that takes root and grows. As Messiah, he has come to *overgrow* Rome, not *overthrow* it!

But that entails the cross, because Rome will not stand any challenge to the Empire. Jesus knows that choosing *against* armed revolt means he will not survive the confrontation between the world of Rome and the New World of the Kingdom. The cross is the inevitable result of the way in which Jesus interprets “Messiah”.

This means that what we are meant to hear in Peter’s rebuke are echoes of the Matthean material about the encounter between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, in which Satan offers Jesus the “kingdoms of the world” ... without the cross! It’s the most potent temptation Jesus faces (Matthew 4: 8-10).

Let’s not be precious about this: Peter tells Jesus something that Jesus desperately

wants to hear! It's got power and pull. Its power is to distract Jesus from his chosen path – the path that he actually desperately fears and wants to avoid. Here is a reprise of Jesus in the wilderness, and a preview of Jesus in Gethsemane. He is being faced with the way of the cross and resists it with every fibre of his soul and being. How much better to be a kingly, powerful messiah! How much easier to have “all the kingdoms of the world” than the kingdom of God, which is reached only by way of the cross!

This is the reason for his sharp rebuke to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!” He immediately calls the crowds and explains that this is the way he is determined to travel, so that any who wish to follow must travel the same route. There are two ways: the divine way and the human way. The human way is an option for the path of glory, adulation, miracle and power. It is option to save its life. The divine way is the way of the cross – of humility, scandal, and incomprehensible self-sacrifice.

It is a way of suffering, failure and self-destruction. Small wonder, then, that Jesus – from the very outset of the passion predictions here in this chapter – recoils so thoroughly from it! Rome will turn out not to have the Last Word. We will discover on Easter Sunday that the Last Word belongs to God – the Word of Resurrection!

But there is no way to resurrection other than through the cross. So Jesus is right when he says that the only way to save one's life is to lose it for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, is to lose it. There is no other road that leads there. But it is not a road to be taken lightly, enthusiastically or joyfully. It's time we stopped being sentimental about the cross, because that sort of sentimentality disguises its awfulness and its “foolishness”. The call to the way of the cross – to discipleship – is a fearful call, and if we hear what it *really* means, we will resist it as strenuously as both Peter and Jesus do!

This is why Jesus refuses to be known as “messiah” at this point. Yes, he is the messiah – but the messiah whose messiahship is via the cross. To hear “You are the Messiah” as *Peter* meant that is to mishear. It is to get Jesus radically wrong, and

therefore to get Christian faith radically wrong. Jesus is no wonder-working, would-be royal!

"Son of Man"

The kingdoms of the world – that was the most seductive version of messiahship on offer. But the way of God – the Kingdom of God – is different. It takes a different route. Ironically, just as Jesus is the Messiah (though not as others understood messiahship), so too he is king – ruler of the kingdom of God – though not as kingship was commonly understood. This is the point of the title, “Son of Man”.

“Son of Man” has *become* a christological title because it was Jesus’ self-description. He chooses “Son of Man” as a way of speaking more truly about himself (before the cross) than “messiah”. But it was *not* a title circulating in the thought and theology of the people of his day. “Son of man” in his day was a Jewish colloquialism for “a human being” – “a bloke”. It literally means, “I as a man”. Jesus’ hearers would have taken it as insignificant. Yet there is an irony to Jesus’ use of it.

There is a hidden meaning. He uses it in reference to the heavenly figure of the Son of Man in Daniel 7: 13-14. Here the Son of Man is a human being-like figure who becomes king of the whole earth and ruler of an everlasting dominion. Daniel is apocalyptic literature. This type of literature presents everything in “code”. This is the “mystery”. The point is that only those “in the know” have the “key” to interpreting the code. Here Jesus takes up the title – in such a way that those *outside* of “the know” would hear it as insignificant and everyday. But to us – readers “in the know” – it plays as a statement: “I *am* a king. I *am* a ruler. But not one like you’ll imagine! I am king and Messiah – but am *both* only by way of the cross!”

What about us?

Jesus invites his disciples to follow him on the road that leads to the New Creation: the Kingdom of God. He invites them to be part of the new life of resurrection and salvation that God yearns to pour out. But that involves the death of the old, and

the rising to life of the new. That is what we are given in Christ. It is above and beyond all that we can imagine or think. But it lies on the other side of the cross. And Jesus says, “There isn’t any other way, folks! I’ve looked – believe me, if there were, I’d have found it. So that’s the way I’m going. Want to follow?”

Going deeper into the text (Mark 8: 27-38)

What does “deny self, take up the cross, and follow me” mean for us? From our reading of the text, we see that to “take up our cross” has specific political and physical implication. Taking up the cross does not mean shouldering the personal burdens put before one in life and carrying on in hope of heavenly rewards. Jesus was speaking of the “execution stake” that is the consequence of posing a threat to entrenched powers. Yet this Jesus bears life for all. How is it that this call to follow him to the execution stake can be a call to life?

“Bear the cross” has been an admonition to deny one’s own experience, need, pain, pleasure and rights. It has meant servanthood, not in the sense of *diakonia*, but in the sense of woman as man’s lesser helper of slave. This was and is even more the case for women of colour forced into slavery. Through out history such abuse of the gospel and of women has had immeasurable social and human cost.

A contemporary example illustrates what Jesus’ call to “deny self” does *not* mean:

A homeless woman who lives at a church was troubled following a sermon about idolatry of self-centred life. She was quilt-ridden about the time she was investing to reclaim her life from hell of drug addiction. This woman never had self of which she was conscious. Instead she became who others expected and demanded her to be. This led to self-contempt, which in turn led into addiction. For this woman (and many like her), the Word of God is not to deny self and lose life, but to find life, to heal, to restore wholeness, to love self. So doing requires saying no to the self-denial as conventional Christian wisdom has understood it.

Christian love may thus be redefined to include the true self-love that heals and empowers us to love deeply, thus healing others and society: Self-love and other-love no longer are understood as opposing forces. On the contrary, self-love is integral prerequisite to profound other-love.

The gospel invitation to deny self, does not refer to the negation of experience, selfhood, human rights, or physical integrity. Rather it challenges the self as the centre of one's universe. It calls us out of life centered in individualism and self-interest and into life according to God's love. The call to follow, then, is a call to walk a path of radical love that challenges oppressive power structures.

This can lead to danger and possibly death because we live out this call in the midst of overwhelming forces of greed and violence. Mark does not suggest that suffering and death are God's will for Jesus or for his disciples. Jesus did not desire execution or see sacrifice as a virtue. He accepted (apparently with fear and trembling) his death as the inevitable consequence of living an all-encompassing love that challenged the oppressive power structures. The consequences of faithfulness to this way can be embraced only in the awareness that the end of his story is God's yes of resurrection life.

1. Where now does Jesus call you to take up the cross and follow him?
2. Where in your life are you called to resist self-negation, the culture of violence, consumerism, or other forces of injustice? Be specific.
3. What are the possible consequences of your following this path?
4. What do you fear most?
5. Who is the community that is called to be with you on this path?

All age worship ideas (Mark 8: 27-38)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer

but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Theme: Who do you say I am?

Ideas – "Guess the Superhero" game (Download the PowerPoint [here](#) or [here](#), depending on your age group).

1. What are the qualities we look for in a hero?
2. What are the qualities we find in Jesus?
3. Why does identifying Jesus as Messiah make a difference?

[Because if that's who he is it changes everything and it means that the expectation on the part of those who follow is sent into the stratosphere. If we see Jesus as a political, albeit peaceful, freedom fighter then that impacts upon how we follow, how we imitate him as Paul might say. If Jesus is Messiah and the Messiah is the saviour/liberator then those who follow Messiah are called to promote that same way of freedom and life – but we do it his way and not in an embellished fashion of our own no matter the cost.]

Prayers – If you have a copy, use the images from the **Christ We Share** pack (if not, please contact either [Darren](#), [Dave](#) or [Daleen](#)) Select a few of the images particularly some of the more challenging ones and reflect on some of the titles we give to Jesus.

1. What kind of Jesus do we get an image of as we put these qualities together?
2. What might it/does it mean for us to follow that Jesus?

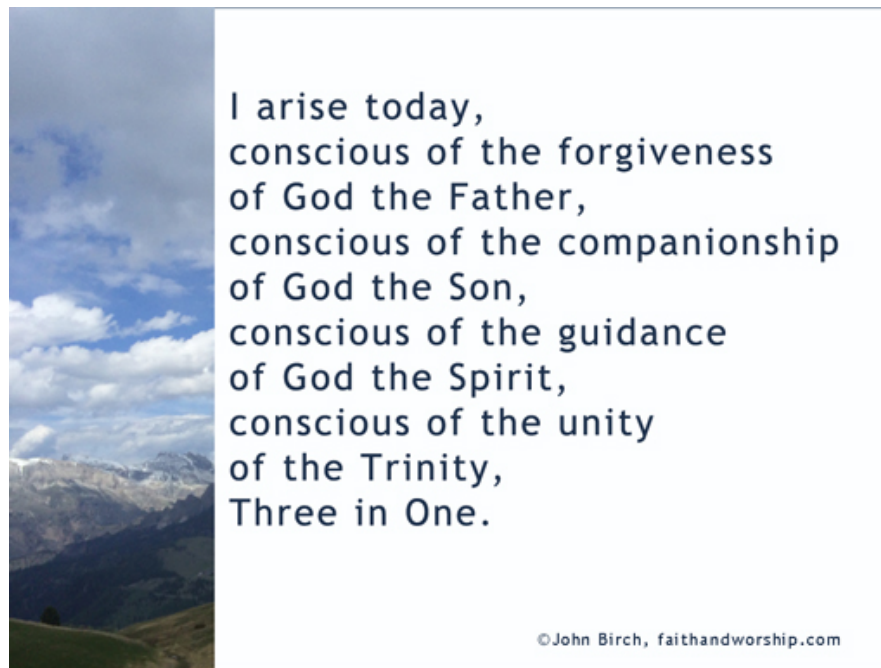
As you reflect on the qualities of Jesus pray that these qualities might become evident in the world as the church of Christ followers embodies and reflects them in her words and actions.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 8: 27-38)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

Theme: Discipleship & the Way of the Cross

An opening slide:



Prayer that helps us think about Jesus:

Lord Jesus, when I am sad and depressed

Help me think of you praying in the garden.

Lord Jesus, when I am fearful

help me to think of you being taken prisoner.

Lord Jesus, when I am ill

help me to think of you being scourged at the pillar.

Lord Jesus, when I have a headache

help me to think of you wearing the crown of thorns.

Lord Jesus, when I am tired

help me to think of you carrying the cross for love of me.

Lord Jesus, when I am humiliated

help me to think of you being stripped of your garments.

Lord Jesus, when I am in pain

help me to think of you being nailed to the cross.

Lord Jesus, when I am lonely

help me to think of you hanging on the cross.

Lord Jesus, when I am dying

Help me to think of you dying on the cross for love of me.

Lord Jesus, help me to remember

how much you suffered for love of me

and help me to love you more and more.

Amen.

(CAFOD)

Discipleship prayer that works well as a prayer of confession:

God of love,
source of mercy and compassion,
weave your dream for the world
into the fabric of our lives.

Remove the scales from our eyes
and lift the indifference from our hearts,
so that we may see your vision –
a new reign of justice and compassion
that will renew the earth.

Transform our lives,
so that we may accomplish your purpose.
Anoint us with your spirit of love
that we might bring good news to the oppressed,

bind up the brokenhearted,
and proclaim release to the captive.

Give us a new urgency
and a new commitment
to feed the hungry,
clothe the naked,
shelter the homeless,
and visit those who live in isolation.

Help us to reach out to those
whom no one else will touch,
to accept the unacceptable,
and to embrace the enemy.

Surround us with your love,
fill us with your grace,
and strengthen us for your service.

Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus –
to deny ourselves,
to take up our crosses,
and to follow.

Make us your disciples.

Amen

(© 2010 Kurt Struckmeyer)



Prayers that might work well thinking about the cross:

Jesus, Lamb of God,
when you walked this earth
you did not consider
heavenly equality,
though that was yours to choose,
but took the role of servant,
and in humility
and obedience
allowed the rough nails of our sin
to be hammered into your flesh
for the sake of our salvation.

And so it is
that we acknowledge you
as Lord of all,
to the glory of God the Father,
Son and Spirit, Three.

<http://www.faithandworship.com/index.htm>

Almighty ever-living God, who as an example of humility for the human race to follow caused our Savior to take flesh and submit to the Cross, graciously grant that

we may heed his lesson of patient suffering and so merit a share in his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and
ever.

(Catholic culture. Org)

Eternal God

You have shown yourself to us

As a God of steadfast love and fidelity.

You gave us Jesus so that we might know

That your love is steadfast, relentless, and endless;

That your faithfulness is constant, honest, and true.

In the name of Jesus,

We come to you as a community of disciples.

May our hearts be consumed by your marvellous love?

May our minds be gripped by your faithful presence?

And in genuine response to your fidelity and love

May we in turn become faithful disciples of Jesus?

Send us forth in the Holy Spirit, dear God;

Send us forth as faithful disciples.

In the way we think, talk and act

May we bear witness to Christ?

Thus may your steadfast love and fidelity

Be made known to the whole world.

Amen.

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