

25Feb2024 Deny Self, Take up Cross, Mark 8.31-38

Romans 4:13-25

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

### **God's Promise Realized through Faith**

<sup>13</sup> For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup> If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup> For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup> Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' <sup>19</sup> He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already <sup>[a]</sup> as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. <sup>20</sup> No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> Therefore his faith <sup>[b]</sup> 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' <sup>23</sup> Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8:31-38

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

### **Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But 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.'

<sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those 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.'

Deny self and take up cross.

Today's gospel reading is one that I expect is really familiar to you. But it is also one that I think is often a bit misunderstood and can be taken rather too literally as well. Apparently one story told of Saint Anthony, about 270 AD when he was late to church one day, he heard this and immediately went out to the desert to live there, selling everything he had to deny himself. This over eager enthusiasm for taking up one's cross is not what I think that Jesus wants us to do today!

So let's look at the passage and consider what Jesus may actually be saying to us today.

This teaching comes immediately after Jesus asking them who they thought he was and Peter replying that he is the Messiah. After many false starts and much misunderstanding, the disciples in the person of Peter have finally realised who Jesus is: 'You are the Christ'. But this has come after the two feeding events, two lots of teaching. The double healing of the blind man ('I see men like trees walking') shows that the disciples will need more help to understand the truth of the matter.

This all happens at Caesarea Philippi – the town dedicated to the worship of Caesar and pagan gods. Though the disciples had finally realised who Jesus was they would have expected that the Messiah was about overthrowing the Romans and the pagan idolatry all around them. From now on Jesus begins to teach them about what being the Messiah, the Christ in Greek, was really all about, and what that meant for all who follow him too. And they have a lot to learn yet.

Jesus up until this point has been teaching everything in parables and explaining them only to the disciples as it says in Mark 4:34. But here he spoke plainly about this – directly to his disciples – about what being the Messiah was going to involve. And they certainly didn't get it. How could the Messiah who is supposed to be their triumphant savior, freeing them from the pagan

oppression of the Romans, suffer and die. And they couldn't grasp the idea of resurrection here either as that was something that was only going to happen on the day of the Lord, at the beginning of the new age, the age to come.

Jesus uses the term for himself – Son of man. This term is used in the Old Testament for mortal humanity, especially in its fragility. But it is also for the one who comes in the clouds to the Ancient of Days and is seated at his right hand to rule over all in Daniel 7. So Jesus is pointing to both his humility and his exaltation, his humiliation and his authority. He is the beloved Son, but this sonship means obedience to the Spirit, and will ultimately lead to the obedience of a sacrificial death. The disciples had yet to grasp any of this aspect of his identity.

So Peter, who had so boldly spoken out their belief that he really is the Messiah, took him aside and rebuked him, spoke very strongly to him against what he had just said. The word used for rebuke here is the word that is used for rebuking a demon during an exorcism – a very strong rebuke. Jesus doesn't just rebuke Peter privately for doing this he does so in front of the other disciples, no doubt realizing that Peter was just voicing what they all would have been thinking. They were thinking wrong and Jesus was very strong in his rebuke – this is the thinking of the enemy – Satan. This is human thinking. Power and political thinking, considering who is in charge. This is not what God is concerned about.

Then Jesus starts talking plainly to everyone. He calls the crowd with his disciples and started to teach them about what it means to be a disciple of this God-centred view of a Messiah, a Messiah who will suffer, be rejected, be killed and then rise again.

We have the benefit of hindsight to know that Jesus is that sort of Messiah and we can understand a lot more about what all that suffering, death and resurrection involved. But we too need to listen carefully to what Jesus says about how to follow him as that kind of Messiah.

Jesus first outlines three aspects of what being a disciple of his involves, the first two of which are easily misunderstood.

The first is to 'deny oneself'. This is not about self-loathing or doing things which deliberately try to make life hard for oneself, or make oneself suffer. Rather the word has the sense of refusing to pay attention to what our own desires are saying. Or to refuse to think about what we just want for ourselves. It is putting yourself at the end of the line. It is refusing to consider our own wants and needs as we follow Jesus. It is turning our thoughts away from ourselves and towards Jesus and what he wants for those around us. We are invited to let go of being self-focussed, self obsessed; to let go of ourselves so that we can follow Jesus freely. This is precisely the attitude that we have seen in Jesus' ministry, focused on obedience to the Spirit and meeting the needs of people, in the first half of Mark's gospel.

The second is to 'take up one's cross'. This phrase has become a saying in common use. I have often heard this being described as carrying the sufferings of life, - carrying the burden of an injury or long term sickness, or the care for some hard task or for someone who is difficult to look after or be with. Some consider bearing with people who hurt you is part of carrying one's cross. It is even used sometimes to mean that one has to bear with injustice, being falsely accused, living within a difficult or even abusive relationship. But Jesus' hearers would not have heard him saying this at all.

In the context of the first century, this could only have one meaning: someone who was carrying a cross was on his or her way to a shameful execution as a slave or a criminal. Jesus and his hearers would have been very familiar with this sight as it was a common form of Roman execution. There is no sense in which this is a 'burden' to be carried through life; it is a burden only carried on the way to death.

So what does it mean to take up your cross? We don't have crucifixion today. To follow Jesus who did take up a cross, walk that shameful path to death, we need to be prepared to experience shame and even death. This sounds absolutely dreadful. Why would we want to follow someone if that is what is involved? Why would anyone worship a God that suffers and dies? Even if the crucified Christ is the one true God. In today's world truth is easily ignored and leads to a much more comfortable life.

What Jesus says next indicates part of the answer.

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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those 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.

Our life is not something we can hold onto. If we are focused on ourselves and the life we want to live we will lose everything and die. If we instead deny ourselves, focus on living the life Jesus has for us, in obedience to him and his Spirit, then we gain eternal life. And it is those words about rising again - those words the disciples right then could not grasp, but we can – that reveal this. This is the core of why we can follow the crucified Messiah, even to possible shame and death.

The reason why following this Son of Man will involve hardship, suffering and public shame is because Jesus is the one who brings in the age to come, the promised 'kingdom of God', and those who belong to this, passing, age oppose and reject him. The world around us may laugh at us, or more forcefully reject us – pressure us to be ashamed of this calling to follow Jesus – but that would have eternal consequences.

So the call to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow the Messiah who suffers, is rejected, killed and then rises again, is good news! Yes, if we follow

this Messiah Jesus, we can expect we may in some way walk that same sort of path, but as we walk in obedience to God, disregarding our own life wants and needs, we will be living that eternal life, that abundant life, that resurrection life, in the new age that broke into the present when Jesus rose from the dead.

In practical terms what does this mean for daily life? To begin with it means we do not need to fear, to be worried or anxious for ourselves. This sort of fear and anxiety is all about what we want – will we get what we think we need or not? But if we are focused on what God wants we will be free from fear to live the abundant life we have in Christ Jesus. Even shame and death are less to be feared if we hold to the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. And we don't need to live as victims either, bearing with injustice, abuse, or those that wrong us – that 'bearing with' still involves focusing on ourselves instead of focusing on God's agenda of putting things right.

Denying ourselves, freeing ourselves of our self-centredness, our striving for our own pleasure, our own gain, our own self-fulfilment, enables us to live the life God intends for us, to live as he made us to be, focused on loving God and our neighbor. Then we can share God's joy at seeing what is wrong in this world put right in people's lives, in creation, in our society, as we cooperate with him in building his Kingdom. This is a far more wonderfully fulfilling life than what we could ever find for ourselves.

So do you really hear Jesus teaching today for us? He is the Messiah who suffers, is rejected, is killed yet he also rises again. And we are called to deny ourselves – focus on God's agenda not our own – and take up the shame and possible suffering that that carrying a cross meant for those in Jesus time – but we also as we follow him begin to live the new life that will be ours into eternity.

I pray each of us may eventually be able to say like Paul in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 3:

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him,

I invite you now to stand and begin our sung worship with blessing God's name in all circumstances – 'Blessed be your name'.