

Sermon - Cross-roads: a turning point

Based on the reading: Mark 8.27–38

Who am I - for others, for you?

- Today's gospel passage is a critical turning point in Mark's account.
- Now we, as readers of the whole book, already know that Jesus is the Anointed One - the Messiah, or Christ - because Mark tells us this in his opening sentence: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1.1)*
- Also, whenever Jesus encounters demonic spirits, they try to name him aloud, but Jesus shuts them up - not because they are lying, but because their timing is not in line with God's timing.
- However, even though we know, and the demons in the telling of the story know, that Jesus is the Messiah, we are journeying with the disciples in the story, and they have not yet realised this about Jesus.
- The passage starts by describing Jesus as being in the region of Caesarea Philippi - which is the furthest he goes from Jerusalem.
- The disciples have seen Jesus healing, calming storms, raising the dead, teaching with authority, and engaging with all kinds of people rejected by society or by religious leaders.
- They have even experienced being sent out themselves, in pairs, under Jesus' authority, to proclaim repentance and make God's kingdom manifest.
- In today's reading Jesus invites them to join the dots, as it were, and to arrive at their own conclusion.
- Firstly he asks them to name other people's conclusions about who he might be, and then he asks the question that every person needs to ask for themselves: *'who do you say that I am?'*
- Peter leads the way, and gives the answer that is on his heart: *'You are the Messiah.'*
- And once again Jesus commands them to keep quiet about this.

The Messiah, yes, but what kind?

- So we come to the moment of transition, because, having acknowledged that Jesus is the One Anointed by God, they immediately and naturally associate the label of Messiah with *their* understanding of what the Messiah is expected to be and do.
- This is that the Messiah would re-establish God's kingdom on earth - but understood as a political kingdom, in the same way that the Kingdom of Israel was an established political entity during the time of King Saul, then King David, and then all of David's successors, until the kingdom was overthrown - first the northern part by the Assyrian Empire, and then the southern part by the Babylonian Empire.
- So as soon as Jesus hears his disciples recognise him as the Messiah, he then gets straight to work with the next phase of preparing his followers to understand what God's Kingdom on earth was really all about:
[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. (Mark 8.31)
- This immediately contradicts their understanding of how things are supposed to work for the Messiah.
- After all, this sounds like a prediction not of glorious triumph, but of disastrous loss.
- And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
- Who can blame Peter? Just as when we see a friend making a bad life choice, we usually care about them enough to want to talk them out of their proposed course of action.

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Get behind me, Satan

- Jesus' response might seem a bit excessive: *'Get behind me, Satan!'* (Mark 8.33)
- I think there are two aspects to this worth noting.
 1. Firstly, I think it indicates that Jesus was genuinely tempted to try to avoid his destiny.
 - He knew that Peter cared deeply, and of course we don't want to inflict suffering on our friends.
 - We also want to avoid suffering for our own sake.
 - It would have been genuinely tempting for Jesus, so far from Jerusalem, to have lived out his days in the Galilean region, exercising his ministry and encouraging so many in their faith relationship with God.
 - So I think that Jesus has to reject this temptation quite forcefully for his own sake, to keep himself determinedly on track in fulfilling God's purpose.
 2. Secondly, I think it indicates a real attempt by Satan to interfere with and disrupt God's work.
 - There are times when even genuinely good and caring people can inadvertently be used as a conduit for evil.
 - It doesn't matter what words we might use to describe their specific actions, whether we describe it in spiritual or psychological terms - the key is that these specific actions are recognised as having a destructive effect.
 - The impact is unloving, or light-dimming, or life-draining.
 - Such is Jesus' spiritual sensitivity that I suggest he discerns in Peter's rebuke - even though given by a close friend - the work of evil, in that it tries to divert Jesus from being obedient to his baptismal vocation, and to divert Jesus from being fully aligned with God's desire.
 - So Jesus forcefully rejects what he recognises as ultimately against God.

Setting our minds

- Jesus follows this with a statement of explanation, that he later fills out in more detail:
'For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' (Mark 8.33)
- This is a question that we all need to ask ourselves frequently: Am I seeing the situation from a human perspective, or from God's perspective?
- For Peter, and the others, this was the start of a lifelong process of ongoing discernment.
- And in the rest of the Gospel accounts, and even in the stories from the Book of Acts, we find Peter getting his discernment regularly mixed up, with his mind on human rather than divine things.
- This is a common occurrence in the Bible stories, of people struggling to recognise when they are genuinely discerning God's will, or God's presence, or not.
- The story of Gideon and the fleece, the story of the prophet Samuel as a boy hearing God's call for the first time, the stories of the disciples encountering the risen Christ and not recognising him - these are some of stories about people struggling to discern the divine in a particular moment or situation.
- In my own striving for discernment, I have found the following questions invaluable, in assessing whether something is of God or not:
 - Is it loving or does it promote love?
 - Is it light-bearing, or is it true enough to withstand the light?
 - Is it life nurturing?
- Of course, if it drains love, or light, or life, then that is a clear indication it is not of God.

Sermon - Cross-roads: a turning point

Denying oneself to follow Jesus

- The final part that I'm going to look at is when Jesus says:
'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Mark 8.34)
- As with many of the things Jesus talks about, it is more helpful to approach this metaphorically, in order to engage with the deeper meaning.
- I hope we all understand that Jesus is not expecting us to be physically nailed to a wooden cross.
- When he talks about 'taking up our cross', it's about what the cross represents.
- Think about what Jesus' cross symbolises.
- It represents the appearance of failure, of weakness, of shame, of being treated as guilty even when innocent.
- It represents pain and suffering, humility, of not being in control, of being naked and exposed.
- And in the midst of all that, Jesus engages with his tormentors, with those whose authority put him there, with those who were cursing him, or jeering at him.
- And what does he do? He asks God to bless them with forgiveness, that they all may be open to having a faith relationship with God themselves.
- This is what sacrificial love - the ultimate sacrificial love - is about.
- Having compassion for everyone we encounter, even those who are our enemies, and praying for their well-being, and for their forgiveness, and for them to be blessed - even when, and especially when, it is costly to us.
- We should not actively seek to suffer the cost - but rather be prepared to accept suffering the cost if others can be blessed.

Facing the shame

- When we talk about suffering, it might sound dramatic - and sometimes it can be.
- However, it usually manifests itself in much less dramatic ways, that are still very challenging for us.
- When was the last time you got something wrong - and, when you realised it, you swallowed your pride, and exercised some humility, and said to the wronged person: 'I'm sorry. I was in the wrong. I apologise'?
- When you are doing this, you are denying your own prideful ego, and are following the way of Jesus' humility.
- Jesus effectively says that when you are too ashamed to lose face in this way, then he will be ashamed of you.
[Jesus said:] '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.' (Mark 8.38)
- When was the last time you knew someone was upset with you, and - even when it *wasn't* your fault - went to them, and did whatever was needful to make amends?
- When you do this, you are denying your own need to be in the right, and are following the way of Jesus' love.
- Jesus effectively says that when you are too ashamed to suborn your own self-rightness to his righteousness of healing and wholeness, then he will be ashamed of you.
- This is a teaching that really challenges us.
- It challenged the early disciples, and it took them a long time to understand and learn how to practice this teaching.
- Nevertheless, this is a fundamental aspect of our Christian faith - of our own faithful following of Jesus, the One Anointed by God.

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- This is one of the key reasons we regularly participate in church services, to learn from Jesus and be encouraged in the vital activity of denying our own self-centered perspective to be able, like Jesus, to operate from God's perspective of sacrificial love.
- Indeed, every time we participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist, this in itself an active reminder of God's sacrificial love that we tangibly engage with.

So may you hear the question that Jesus asks, and make your own truthful response: Who do you say that Jesus is, for you?

May you ask God for discernment about the words and behaviour of those close to you, that you may discern what is good and what is evil.

May you set your mind on divine things rather than human things, and ask God's help to discern the difference.

And may you intentionally learn and practice denying your own ego, and following Jesus in his way of sacrificial love.