

Sermon on Mark chapter 8 verses 31-38 Sunday 28th February 2021

By Gill Barrett

The gospel reading from Mark that we read today really set me thinking. I remember very clearly discussing this during my Reader training a decade ago. In the gospel reading, Jesus has gone with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a fairly remote area in the foothills of Mount Hermon, not to talk to crowds but to be with just the disciples. It was a chance to teach them privately, just as we Readers in Training were being taught.

Here, in the gospel reading, Jesus began to teach something new, worrying and very deflating for the disciples:

He said, "He, Jesus, the Son of Man, must suffer. He will be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law and he will be killed and after three days raised."

This must have been jaw-dropping for the disciples. They had just experienced Jesus feeding thousands of people with just 7 loaves and 2 fish. They had seen him cure a blind man. They thought they had understood. So, Peter's reply to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' was "You are the Christ." Yet Jesus warned him not to tell anyone about him.

Then Peter took Jesus aside and started to scold him. But Jesus turned round, saw the disciples listening and rebuked Peter. "Get behind me Satan (or, in translation, Accuser). You're thinking human thoughts, not God's thoughts."

Jesus is telling the disciples that he **must** go to Jerusalem and be killed and anyone who wants to follow him must be prepared for the same fate.

Why was he so angry with Peter?

Peter hadn't really got it. He was expecting a warrior king. He hadn't grasped that death was part of Jesus' mission. Jesus had to die because it was part of the will and plan of God. It is described in the scriptures.

In Isaiah chapter 53 we read, "See, my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him, on Jesus, his son, the iniquity of us all."

We read this passage as part of the service of 9 lessons and carols every year. It is familiar and beautiful language, yet we can really miss the point: that it was God's will that Jesus should die for us. That death was part of Jesus' mission and so Peter, in his anxiety for Jesus, the man, was trying to oppose the will and plan of God.

Peter expected a warrior king. In his words to Jesus he has repeated the challenge of Satan, the Accuser to Jesus all along. "Come on Jesus. You can't go and die. You're doing fine; some more healing, some more parables, people will get the message."

But Jesus recognises the voice of Satan; that is why he goes to his death on the cross. It is to fulfil God's will. It is the only means by which mankind will be rescued. It is the only means by which we will be saved and the only means by which, through Christ, we have the promise of everlasting life.

But, just as there was a challenge for Peter, there is also a challenge for us. Just as Jesus dies, so we must die too. We each have a cross to bear. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

And so we can pray,

"Forgive us, gracious Lord, when we have preferred human common sense to the strange wisdom and power of your cross. Give us strength and clarity of understanding to hear your call afresh and to follow where you lead. Amen"