

Cross Purposes!

Isaiah 50^{4-9a}; Psalm 116¹⁻⁸; James 3¹⁻¹²; Mark 8^{27-end}

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
[Mark 8³⁴]*

If you really want to understand what the Bible is teaching it is important to think yourself back into the time and into the mind of the people who were there at the time.

That is especially true with some of the things we think we know best.

A couple of weeks ago we took note of the fact that Mark was writing his Gospel between the years of 64 and 67CE. We don't know if he was an eyewitness of a lot of the contents of the Gospel, but he was the secretary to Peter, the leader of the Apostles. These were the stories that Mark had heard for 30 years - stories told amongst those who were there so they would be accurate - and was setting down for future generations. He was also writing at the height of Nero's persecution of Christians, which is why suffering is one of the key themes in the Gospel.

Today we reach that point in the Gospel where Mark has established who Jesus is and in culminates in two questions:

Who do people say that I am?

and

Who do you say that I am?

You cannot encounter Jesus and not make a decision about who you think he is. Mark records the general view that this is a great spiritual figure or a prophet. But that isn't enough. Peter gets closer to it - **You are the Messiah!**

In all the political expectations at the time this was it: someone who was going to get rid of the immediate problem (the Romans) and let things go back to how they were.

But Mark records Jesus as changing gear: **the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the chief priests, the elders and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.**

We look back on this and have some understanding, but at the time it was not what people were expecting and not what they thought should happen.

I love the image of Peter taking Jesus on one side and **rebuking** him: how brave, considerate, misguided and wrong! He could never have expected that Jesus

would, loudly enough for all to hear, proclaim: **Get behind me Satan!** This may have been the public agenda, but it wasn't God's!

Jesus uses the opportunity to make things clear. We need to bear in mind that what Jesus says is before his own death and before the cross has become little more than an idealised decoration: in any Roman-ruled country, crucifixions would have been a ready visual aid. You can almost see someone being led to be crucified as Jesus speaks. There are three things expected of Jesus disciples:

- I. Deny self** - one of the key parts of the punishment was the lack of dignity. Art may have various bits of cloth covering the dignity of the crucified Jesus, but that wasn't something the Romans did! Faith gifts us forgiveness, but not respectability; faith gives us hope, not status.
- II. Take up their cross** - the walk from the place of trial to the place of execution was never easy. The weight of the cross; the goading of the soldiers; the mockery of the crowd all added to the burden. There is no sandpaper that takes the splinters out of the cross for modern Christians!
- III. Follow Christ** - this isn't an invitation to be 'groupies' but to have Jesus so much at the centre of who we are that we do what he would do, say what he would say and think as he would think.

Our local paper always used to carry the details of the wills of those who had died. It was a ritual on Friday morning that my grandfather would attempt to read them and my grannie would disturb him to find out how much people left. Sometimes, exasperated with her interruptions, he would simply say, 'They left it all!'

That is what Jesus is saying as this chapter closes - to a generation of Christians who might be called on to make a choice of life and death for the sake of their belief in Jesus, Mark says there is nothing worth holding on to that you won't have to let go of.

We don't (as yet at any rate) face the same choice, but what might Mark challenge us with? I have tried to find a modern-day equivalent of the cross, but have failed (a challenge for you!).

However, the challenge is to follow Jesus. When I left my last job a colleague gave me a book - she said it was easy read, so I took it for my trip up North! *The Absence of Mind* by Marilynne Robinson turned out to be a very demanding read on the philosophy of being human. In it she describes how the Western Church developed the notion of a static God, like idols that we can put down and that god remains safely out of the way, while we get on with our lives, returning to where we put God down when we need him. Not so with the call to follow! God doesn't stay where we put him and we can't stay the same!

Are we working at cross purposes or are we followers?