

09, Sep 13 Mark 8:27 - 9: 1
A "Pouring Out Life"

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

- Today's reading is from Mark's gospel- and we've seen before that Mark uses a framing technique where one story is placed within the frame of another story and the stories interpret each other.
- Today's reading is the first of 3 occasions when Jesus teaches that he must suffer and die, and if people want to follow him, they must do the same.
- The stories framing this teaching are of blind men being healed. The first blind man receives his healing in stages- and we see in today's lesson how Peter begins to see, but there is yet more to see. The second blind man is healed in order to follow in Jesus way, and we'll discover that there is a link between seeing and following Jesus.
- I'd like also to explain 2 titles that are used for Jesus in this reading: Messiah and Son of Man.
- Messiah is the more familiar term to us – it means one who is anointed. Someone who's chosen and empowered by God for a purpose- and the long awaited Messiah of the Jews was expected to defeat the Roman oppressors in battle. To be a Messiah who suffered or died- would be an oxymoron- the two ideas were incompatible
- Peter names Jesus as Messiah. But Jesus doesn't refer to himself as Messiah. In the gospel of Mark, he chooses the title, Son of Man.
- Son of Man, is a Hebrew idiom, simply meaning the human one, a human being.
- The prophet Daniel uses the same idiom (7: 13, 14). He speaks of one like a Son of Man, who is given power and dominion over all things- and this is achieved mysteriously- not through violence.
- It could be that Jesus calls himself Son of Man, to emphasise that the deliverance he brings will not be through violence, but by some other mysterious means, which he begins to teach about in today's reading.
- Let us listen for the Word of God as it comes to us today through the gospel of Mark, and may God open OUR eyes to see more than we have seen thus far, and set our feet in following in Jesus' way.

SERMON

Late one night, at the insane asylum, one inmate shouts, "I am Napoleon!" Another patient asks, "How do you know?" The first inmate says, "God has told me!" Just then, a voice from another room shouts, "I did NOT".

Today's reading raises two questions of identity. "Who is Jesus?" and "Who do we want to become? Do we want to become Jesus followers?" Jesus asks firstly about himself. "Who do people say that I am?"

"When people look at me, when they see the signs and the wonders that I perform, when they hear me speak, what do they see? Who do they say that I am?"

No one replies "what do you mean, who are you- you're Jesus of Nazareth" It's taken for granted that THAT cannot be the whole answer.

There's a buzz of excitement as the disciples report what they've heard. One says, "They say you're Elijah, who has returned!". Another offers "I've heard them say John the Baptist," and yet another, "Some say Jeremiah!"

Jesus cuts in, "And who do YOU say that I am?". Silence falls. Only Peter dares to whisper the one word that is on their hearts and minds. "Moshiah", Messiah. The word hangs in the air. Jesus does not refute it. He just says, "Shh.....Tell no one".

The question of who Jesus is has fascinated Christians and non Christians alike. Most people who know even a little of Jesus recognise that there is SOMETHING unusual about this man.

When he came as a stranger to those men mending their fishing nets on the shores of Galilee, and said, "Follow me", they left EVERYTHING behind and followed, not KNOWING who it was they were following, or why.

It's maybe the same for us, we're drawn to this man and we follow. Even those of us who've heard of Jesus from our earliest days, may not know exactly who he is or why we follow, but we're drawn to him, and on the way, the question is asked of us, again and again, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Who do we see, when we look at Jesus? A prophet? Whose words and actions call us to greater faithfulness? A revolutionary? Who overthrows the power systems of this world? A wisdom teacher who shows us the path of transformation? A healer? God in the flesh?

Who do we see?

For Peter, the word "Moshiah", Messiah, is the highest acclaim, the highest hope, the holiest term, that he could give to a human being. And it seems that his answer takes him to the top of the class.

But the next minute Jesus is telling everyone how he will suffer and be killed. And it's Peter's turn to say "shh, don't SAY that. No one will follow you into battle if they think you'll get killed. You may be the Messiah, I'll follow you anywhere, but you're clearly going to need a right hand person, a general who'll help you strategise.."

I'm imagining what Peter says, of course- we're only told that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. The irony is not lost on us -of Peter rebuking Jesus, thinking he knows better than Jesus, whom he has just named as the Messiah!

Peter does not remain at the top of the class!. Jesus turns his back on him. Calls him Satan! Jesus does not need human wisdom, it is we who need divine wisdom.

And then Jesus does his recruitment bid. Does anyone here want to become my follower? Take up your cross. What about you, and you? Do you want to follow me? Then take up your cross.

There was no confusion in Jesus day about what this meant. Taking up one's cross had not yet become a metaphor for enduring anything from a bad toothache to a difficult family member. The cross was the Roman method of execution, reserved for those who opposed the state. It was the punishment for rebels.

So Jesus is using the language of rebellion against the forces of Empire, but he's not promising victory, he's promising defeat- anyone who goes with him must be prepared to die, not gloriously in battle, but in a shameful, humiliating, agonising death.

I don't think Jesus would have had a problem with crowd control after this. He won't need to withdraw to get away from people again- they'll be getting away from him.

But those who stay, those who sense that beyond all reason, beyond all human understanding and expectation, there is in this man the way to life, and that no other way will satisfy, those who don't turn away but are prepared to die, to give up everything, THEY will find the life that Jesus promises.

Who is Jesus? We'll never understand that question through argument or through debate, interesting though that may be.

We only come to know who Jesus is by answering the question, "Do we want to become his followers?" We'll come to know who Jesus is by following in Jesus way.

By following the one who poured out his life, who utterly abandoned his life into God's hands. By being prepared to do the same, to pour out every blessing that has ever been poured into us.

To become a follower of Jesus, to embark on this journey of discovery and revelation, we need to be prepared to die - to die to everything that is of the world and that is not of God-

To let go of our attachment to material things, to popular approval, to status, to power- Jesus says, "what will it profit them to gain the whole world and lose their life?"

To follow Jesus we need to make a mind shift in what is truly important. We need to let go of our pride, our self righteousness, our judgment of others. As followers of Jesus we live a poured out life- we give generously of what we have, we serve, and we forgive, over and over and over.

So simple and yet so difficult to attain. Often I feel that I've not even begun this journey. Perhaps you feel the same. But there's story that I find quite encouraging.

The first part you may be familiar with- a Polish priest, Maximilian Kolbe, was in a Nazi extermination camp- The prisoners were to be punished for an infraction of rules.

Ten Jewish men were selected to be starved to death in an underground bunker, and one man cried for mercy - he had a wife and children and he had to live, Kolbe offered himself to die in that man's place. And the exchange was accepted- a fine, admirable act.

Here's the part that I find really hopeful: Kolbe was in recent years deemed by the Roman Catholic church to be a saint. At the same time there was some muttering from those who knew Kolbe before the war- he had run a newsletter that was openly anti-Semitic in content.

It seems that something happened to change him- we'll never know what- but the story indicates that it's never too late- no matter what our track record, it's never too late to turn and to follow Jesus.

We can only speculate about Kolbe and what changed him- was it his suffering? The suffering he saw around him?

We all know suffering. We know how suffering can bring us low, can break us open. And we see in Jesus the example of someone who faced into suffering, and in Jesus we see that there is a way through suffering, a way that leads to life. If we can follow him.

If in our suffering we can surrender to God, as Jesus did, God will open a door to life for us too, in this life as well as beyond. If we can simply say to God,

Lord, here is my life, I surrender it all to you. You work for good in all things, so take everything in my life, take it and use it for your good purposes.

Use my suffering, use my joy. Use my struggles, use my failures, use my victories. Use my weakness, use my strength- Everything you've poured into me, I pour out for you- I surrender it all to your will.

Be assured: God will open a door before us that leads to life.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory. amen