

Lent 2 – Take up your cross – Mark 8:31-38

Today's Gospel reading is a turning-point moment.

In order to set things in the context of the journey we're walking during Lent, we need to retrace our steps

Earlier, Jesus had asked the disciples 'Who do people say that I am?' asks Jesus... In true confused fashion, the disciples according to Mark are somewhat confused - in chapter 6 they even mistake him for a ghost!

Mark puts the record straight from the beginning though - Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. So what point is he trying to make in the question?

Well, that Identity matters - People had been wondering who this Jesus was – Herod thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead because, like John, Jesus challenges social and religious norms of the day – he gets known as a rebel – a trouble maker.

Of course now, we know that Jesus is more or less signing his own death warrant with such radical behaviour and teaching – and when Peter affirms that Jesus IS the Messiah, *Peter* too is also signing his and accepting the inevitability of great suffering as a follower of such a man - bearing the cross of the greatest earthly cost – but of course, heavenly gain...

When Jesus becomes truly known there seems to be no going back – some of us might be able to say from experience that by following Jesus in faith, some might be subjected to a degree of suffering this side of heaven's gate... And suffering doesn't have to mean a literal crucifixion, but rather a really difficult and life-changing choice or a tough decision – or even a traumatic or tragic experience that you have absolutely no control over but which has to be endured anyway.... It seems we really do have our cross to bear at some time or another and there is no way in that moment of seeing a blessing within it. Even today trusting in God and following the path of righteousness is no easy task in the face of a pandemic, conflicted and troubled world which – quite frankly – sometimes doesn't seem to have changed all that much from the disciples' day – just different scenery...

Deeper, more rooted desire and longing for authentic and loving solutions MUST be rooted in depth and weight we are coming to see – beginning with one heart, one mind, one action at a time – beginning with us by following Jesus who leads by example – no DIY YouTube learning in this game –

Imitating Jesus means exactly that - calling - believing - following - imitating - discipleship in the image of Jesus - missio dei - the mission of God by imitating Jesus and inviting others to join the journey of God's love. The need was then and is today great – the dark is very dark as it is before dawn – the light has to shine brighter – we have to shine brighter....

As people of faith, we think we know who Jesus is – but do we know him well enough – do we understand who Jesus really is – and what he really expects from us? Jesus teaches that God's love is about action – it's a verb – we express a loving heart inwardly in our connection to God through Jesus as our mediator, and outwardly in what we do in his name through the Holy Spirit enabling us.....

Even Peter might be brought into question as his part in the journey to the cross unfolds – especially beginning here. According to Mark, even dedication to his master met with doubt and ambiguity – Peter had already confessed that Jesus was the Messiah – but he doesn't seem to grasp that Jesus' true identity and significance will be revealed through his death and resurrection...

It's as if he can't bear to think that rejection and death could be so for the Messiah – for their Messiah.... Was he embarrassed? Was he disappointed that his ideal of a hero- Messiah, knight in shining armour who will save them from the oppression of the day was not living up to the mark? – or perhaps he just loved him so much that he couldn't bear the thought...

Either way – this got me thinking about my first thoughts about who Jesus was and what he could do for me – as far back as my Sunday school days with Baby Jesus meek and mild followed by gentle Jesus who walked from town to town in shiny white robes, stunning blue eyes healing the sick and bringing peace wherever he went – but the further I journey with him the further away from my ideal I become as I of late encounter this radical, hard-hitting game-changer – clothes now a little more earthy and worn, who is standing for no nonsense from the charlatans of the day. I remember the uncomfortable shift that preceded the utter admiration and bravo-cry that came from heart in realising Jesus as not only my friend, but my saviour.....

How about you – where has your journey with Jesus led you as you get to know him – something to ponder on in days to come for sure...

And coming back to Peter's encounter – as Jesus announces for the first time what is to happen, the word Jesus actually challenges him with is the word 'ashamed'.... 'those who are ashamed of me....the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in glory...' Embarrassment and shame – evoked when expectations have been challenged and when worldly views and concerns have become more important than the view and concerns of God – 'Get behind me Satan' Jesus orders....

The world's view and God's view of love – of what it means to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with God is colliding. Peter, like us, can only partially see the true identity of Jesus who is breaking through into the world to bring peace, healing and reconciliation– 'I am the way, the truth, the life – I come to give life and to give life more abundantly' says Jesus

But we can take heart. We are following the God of the Gospel where everything is turned on its head – where to lose life is to win life – where weakness is strength – where on the one hand Jesus is telling his followers to keep quiet about the good news of who he really is – but is quite openly foretelling the imminent suffering and death that is to come...

I wonder if, like me, you can fully understand the human emotions involved here...Peter had spent many months with Jesus revelling in their strong and powerful leader. And now he is going under as they get closer to Jerusalem.

But while Mark portrays Peter somewhat brutally as someone still very earthbound as we witness heaven and earth colliding – someone whose head can't quite follow his heart at this point – getting caught up in the emotions that come from disappointment and failed expectations, as that admirable authority and strength of Jesus' ministry seems to be crumbling into a pile of vulnerability and weakness – we will be able to look to John's Gospel to get the measure of God's faithful love for Peter – and for us regardless as Peter gets the chance to come face to face with the Risen Lord and receive affirmation of love and forgiveness for his earlier fumbings that will then energise him for a powerful ministry to come.

So like Peter, we too journey on, taking the cross of our own fumbings and failings in trust and faith that in our weaknesses are our strengths and that God's promise of unconditional, everlasting and eternal life in Christ is for every one of us who simply give this faith thing our best shot...

Amen