

Magarey Lectures 2016

Bible Studies by Greg Elsdon

Jesus and his Disciples at Cross Purposes

STUDY TWO: Mark 8:27-38

Following the *crucified* one



By way of revision: An overview of Mark 8:22-10:52

The central section of Mark's Gospel (8:22-10:52) illustrates the way Mark tells his story of Jesus in order to address the needs of his own community. As the disciples followed Jesus from Caesarea Philippi in the north to Jerusalem in the south they were confronted like never before with the question of who they thought Jesus was and what it really meant to follow him. Jesus did not want people to follow him under false pretences. Three times he told them clearly that he was headed for trouble. The religious leaders who had been plotting against him since early in the story would finally see him dead!

Mark uses the story blind man at Bethsaida to illustrate the disciples' journey from blindness to sight. From this 'difficult-to-heal' blind man readers of Mark's Gospel learn that curing the blindness of the disciples will be no easy task – even for Jesus! Mark goes to considerable lengths to inform his readers that after each of the three so-called 'passion predictions' made by Jesus the disciples demonstrated their serious misunderstanding of what he was calling them to. On each occasion this provides Jesus with the opportunity to teach them more about the ways of God.

FIRST, Peter rebukes Jesus and ends up himself being reprimanded in front of his colleagues with the scathing censure, **"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men"** (8:33). 'Not only am I headed for trouble', says Jesus, 'but if you want to come with me it's going to be a rough ride for you too.' **SECOND**, the disciples ignore Jesus' teaching about the suffering Son of Man and argue amongst themselves about which of them is the greatest (9:33-37). Jesus then taught his disciples that the very question, 'Who is the greatest?' is inappropriate for those who wish to follow him. Discipleship is concerned with service and humility rather than position and privilege. And **THIRD**, two of the disciples who had been closest to Jesus begin to elbow for positions of power and authority for themselves (10:35-45). Jesus then informs them that the greatness that really counts is expressed in service of others, not power and control. They simply did not understand what he was saying to them about his destiny – and theirs.

Three times Jesus **reveals** something about his identity and destiny; three times the disciples **misunderstand** and resist him; and three times Jesus **instructs** his disciples in the ways of God's Kingdom. How hard it is to open the eyes of the blind! Hard, yes. But not impossible! In the healing of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, Mark celebrates the way forward.

The disciples' journey to Jerusalem was more than a geographical journey. They were on a journey of discovery about the identity of Jesus and the nature of life in God's Kingdom. Although they could see that Jesus was someone of importance with something important to say, they were unable, or unwilling, to see clearly what Jesus was unveiling before them. As Christian readers of these ancient stories we are challenged to make our own responses to this revelation of the identity and mission of Jesus. Having seen what we have seen, how will we live our lives?

Mark 8:27-38

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 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."

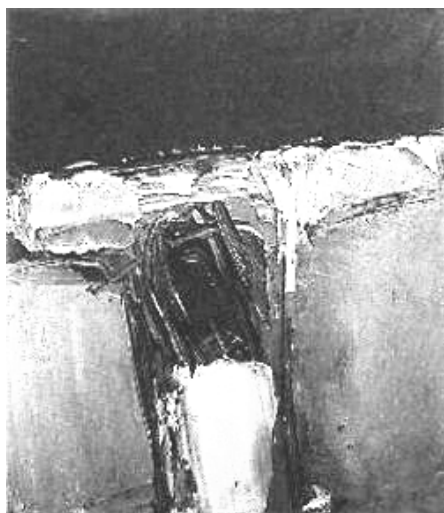
Mark encourages his readers as they endure suffering for their faith by reminding them (and perhaps informing some of them for the first time) of the way Jesus prepared his first disciples for the hardships that would be experienced by those who followed him.

8:27-30	Jesus is the Messiah
8:31-33	First passion prediction
8:34-9:1	Taking up the cross
9:2-13 T	he transfiguration of Jesus
9:14-29	Healing a possessed boy

"In (the story of the blind man at Bethsaida) Jesus apparently fails at the first attempt for the man's sight is only partially restored; at the second attempt he succeeds fully and the man sees properly. If the restoration of sight symbolises the opening of the understanding to truth then in its present context this miracle suggests that an understanding of the death of Jesus, and we may add in anticipation an understanding of discipleship, may come in more than one stage. When Jesus asks Peter who he is Peter says that he is the Messiah.

This is partial sight. Peter recognises that Jesus is someone of unique importance and places him in the most outstanding category he knows but, as Peter understands that category and as it was then normally understood, it is the category of one who rules, and rules by force rather than love; this is not what Jesus is. Thus Peter sees only partially; it is only as the story develops beyond the resurrection that he sees fully." **(Ernest Best)**

Traditionally Jesus's curt response to Peter's 'confession' has been interpreted as his attempt to keep his messianic identity concealed until the time was right, or until such time as the understanding of the term 'Messiah' has been clarified. However it is also possible that Jesus is actually objecting to the use of messianic titles *per se*. "Don't talk like this about me! Such talk is inappropriate!"



Following his silencing of the disciples Jesus begins, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, to talk clearly about who he understands himself to be and what he considers to be his mission. Rejecting elevated titles and the quest for power, **Jesus talks of himself as the suffering Son of Man and informs the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be killed by Israel's religious leaders.**

To readers of Mark's Gospel who already know the end of the story, Jesus' talk of taking up the cross can be interpreted in a variety of ways – many of which allow us to avoid the sharp edge of Jesus' call. But for Jesus' first hearers this talk of 'the cross' meant only one thing - the brutal consequence of living a life shaped by the in-breaking Reign of God that inevitably challenged and disturbed religious and social *status quo*.

But for many "followers of Jesus" the cross, this instrument of torture, has become a jewel-encrusted ornament symbolising anything but the reality of torture and execution. And the death of Jesus, the death he died at the hands of those who opposed his life, has become all too easily dissolved into some sort of otherworldly transaction between God and God only knows who else!

The 'cross' of Jesus is no longer a scandal. It has become a perfectly reasonable and rational, a thoroughly moral act within a pre-determined cosmic drama of salvation. The confession of the crucified one as "Son of God" is no longer seen as blasphemous - the most radical act of God has been domesticated, sterilised, made ineffectual.

Jesus also made it clear that those who wished to follow him must be prepared for opposition and rejection. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” (Mk 8:34) And if we are to even begin to hear what Jesus was meaning by these challenging words we must strip away every hint of sentimentality from this reference to crucifixion and see it for what it is - a call to join Jesus in the costly mission of the Kingdom, prepared to face the consequences.



Peter needed to learn that the way of service and suffering was not only the way for Jesus as God’s Messiah, it was also the way for those who wished to follow him. The way of Jesus provides a model or example of faithful living. The way of the master is also to be the way of the servant. This is precisely what it means to **follow!**

It is not possible to respond to this tough call without a thorough renewal of our whole selves – an ongoing conversion. The teaching of Jesus calls for his followers, then and now, to find their life by giving it away; to deny themselves, take up **their** cross, and follow him in his life of faithfulness and service. These words are often sadly misinterpreted, encouraging people to abandon their humanity and live lives of unnecessary and destructive self-loathing. This was never what Jesus intended.

“Today the Church... must turn to the crucified Christ in order to show the world the freedom he offers. This is essential if it wishes to become what it asserts it is: the Church of Christ.” (**Jürgen Moltmann**)