

Lent : 28th February 2021

Mark 8:31-38

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Who IS Jesus? This is a persistent theme in Mark's gospel; it was a question of debate in the early church; and it's still a question which people reflect on today. Every year at the UWA Orientation Day, one of the Christian Groups has a big sign up saying, 'Who is Jesus'. Was he a teacher? A prophet? A philosopher? Was a deluded mad man? Was he a heretic? A revolutionary? A threat?

Jesus asks the disciples this question as they are walking along the road, 'Who do people say I am?' Then he focusses the question, 'who do YOU say I am'?

To which Peter makes the famous confession of faith, 'To you are Messiah' (in Greek, 'you are the Anointed – the Christ').

Jesus replies by *sternly* ordering them not to tell anyone about him. Jesus telling people to be quiet about him happens regularly Mark's gospel. Some scholars call this the 'Messianic Secret'.

Why the secrecy? Within these few verses we see Peter get in completely right AND completely wrong.

Peter says 'you are the Messiah', but when Jesus point out to him that being the Messiah is going to involve being killed, Peter gets very angry. Jesus, in return, rebukes Peter – 'get behind me Satan'.

One minute Peter gets Jesus completely right. The next minute Peter gets Jesus completely wrong. The man who becomes the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope, Jesus calls 'Satan'. It's an extraordinary turn around and becomes the opportunity for Jesus to make is VERY clear to his disciples what is at stake.

"If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me, 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 good-news, will save it"

As followers of Jesus what does it mean to

- deny ourselves;
- to take up our cross;
- to follow me
- to gain our life by losing our life

One of the things which I notice here is that Jesus doesn't say to take up HIS cross. We have to take up our OWN cross? To lose our OWN life?

For each person what this looks like will be different in the specifics. The general principle is that what we THOUGHT was our life is only partial. There is something fuller to be realised.

It seems to me that another way we could translate the word life, is 'ego'.

Jesus invites us to lose our EGO. The way this works in Christian Spirituality is a bit different to the way it works in Buddhist spirituality. In Buddhist spirituality the ego is something to ultimately be completely lost, as we are absorbed into the great oneness of things.

In Christian spirituality, our ego identity is never destroyed or absorbed. What happens is that our ego identity is relocated in relation to God. Rather than us being the centre of the circle, and everything revolving around us, God becomes the centre of the circle around which everyone and everything is referenced. Our prayer becomes a constant, 'thy will be done'. To lose our life is to have our ego transfigured or transformed into divine love. There is a sense in which we lose ourselves...that we lose our ego...but not in the sense of annihilating the ego. What is being lost or given up, what is dying are our attachments, compulsion, addictions – anything which distorts love.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus prays to the Father, 'YOUR kingdom come...YOUR will be done'. This doesn't mean that there is a predetermined master plan for our lives that we either figure out or don't figure out. Rather, to DO the will of the Father is always to do the most loving thing we can in this particular moment, in this particular set of circumstances. This does exclude loving ourselves as well as loving others. God is endlessly adaptable. The plan for our lives is less like a map that is predetermined and more like a SIRI GPS. For every decision we make, God recalculates the route towards himself/herself.

To pick up OUR cross is to live with the consequences of where love takes us. I personally hope that I will not have to face actual crucifixion. Even Jesus says, 'take THIS cup from me'. It must have been terrifying. But plenty of Christians have found that doing the loving thing has led them into some very dangerous situations including sometime dying. This is dramatic of course. For most of us, saying, 'thy will be done' will mean simple everyday acts of courage in which my own ego is placed in the service of love. So rather than timid we might be courageous. Or rather than domineering another person, we might very consciously stop and listen. Or maybe instead of beating ourselves up because we don't think we are good enough, we might say, 'I'm scared in this situation, Lord, but I ask that the strength of your Spirit will work through me.

Meditation is quite simply a daily practice of letting go. It has been called, 'the way of dying' because every time those incessant thoughts of the ego come charging in and giving us fantasies of being right, or impressive, or in control, we practice turning our attention towards the centre, who is Christ, by saying our prayer word. In doing this, we open a receptivity to God's love in us and through us.

This way of OUR Dying, this way of OUR cross opens up the pathway to abundant life – for ourselves and others. We become part of the Kingdom of God here on earth.