**Sermon for 28 February 2021**

**Life from God’s point of view**

*Please read Mark 8.31 – 9.1.*

You may have noticed that today’s reading comes straight before the Transfiguration, which we looked at two weeks ago. The Transfiguration is more or less in the middle of Mark’s Gospel, and it’s a turning point. From that point Jesus is journeying towards Jerusalem. And as he does that, he also speaks about his death. He does it for the first time in today’s passage, and then twice more before his arrival in Jerusalem in chapter 11 (see 9.30-32 and 10.32-34).

In today’s reading Jesus first of all addresses his disciples, but then calls the crowd to him. Let’s see what he has to say to each group.

1. **Jesus speaks to the disciples (v.31-33)**

‘He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.’ In Mark we’ve already seen Jesus in confrontation with the religious authorities. But soon it’s going to get more intense. He will be rejected by ‘the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law’ – those he will encounter and challenge in Jerusalem – and he will be killed. Some people might have seen this coming already – there are hints. But now he makes it very clear – he speaks ‘plainly’ about it. Nobody could fail to understand this!

Peter understands, but he doesn’t like the idea. He’s just declared that Jesus is the Messiah (v.29) – perhaps he’s still buoyed up by that experience, full of confidence. And perhaps he doesn’t see how Jesus’ dying fits with being the Messiah – wouldn’t that be the end of his rule? So he rebukes Jesus – he tells him he’s got it wrong! But I bet Peter wished he’d never opened his mouth! Jesus turns to his disciples, and in front of them all rebukes Peter: ‘Get behind me, Satan!’

When I was ten, I went to a new school for a year and I was very happy there. During the first term, though, I went to a drama group one evening after school, and we rehearsed a play for Christmas. It was some original take on the birth or childhood of Jesus. I can’t remember any of the details, except that I was given the role of a young Judas Iscariot. I can’t remember what I had to say. I just remember lurking to the side of the stage ready for my appearance, and that he wasn’t a very nice character! It was probably unfair on Judas to brand him from childhood in this way, but I felt it was very unfair on me! I really resented having this part and took it very personally. I didn’t go back to the drama group after Christmas!

Perhaps it’s a good job I wasn’t playing Satan! But I wonder how Peter felt. And why does Jesus respond so forcefully? If Jesus was anyone else, you’d say Peter had hit a very raw nerve.

We said last week that Jesus’ wilderness experience was only the start of his temptations. Perhaps he’s being tempted through Peter not to go to Jerusalem and die. But Jesus continues, ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’ Whether or not Jesus is being tempted, Peter’s view on the matter comes from a human way of looking at things. It’s not God’s way of looking at things, and it’s opposed to God’s way. It’s therefore something that Satan or the powers of evil would be very pleased with – Jesus’ retreating in the battle against them.

God’s way is challenging, but he looks at things from a much wider perspective, a long-term perspective. The human way is much more comfortable; it avoids pain and suffering – at least for now. But it really won’t achieve anything in the fight against evil. For evil to be defeated, Jesus must die.

Jesus’ death is seen here as the result of his confrontation with the religious authorities – ‘the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law’. In order to fulfil the law, he has a bust-up with the law – with its limitations and how it’s being taught by people. But the battle is bigger than this…

1. **Jesus speaks to the crowd (v.34-38)**

As Jesus calls the crowd to join his disciples, he seems to open up a much bigger view of things…

He says that looking at things in God’s way doesn’t just apply to him or his disciples, but to anyone who wants to join them. And it’s not just looking at things in God’s way, but doing them in God’s way: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

This means that those who follow Jesus will also have to suffer. It’s similar to some of the things we thought about last week, with Jesus’ being tempted in the wilderness. Following Jesus doesn’t result in an easier life! We also mentioned giving things up for Lent last week, but ‘denying yourself’ here isn’t just going without chocolate for a few weeks – or even something harder! Put the emphasis on ‘yourself’. It means realising that you are not at the centre of things, or even the centre of your life. God is at the centre of things, and we therefore need to see life and live life from his point of view.

And Jesus mentions the cross. This wasn’t a Jewish instrument of torture, but a Roman one. Only the Romans could put someone to death in this way, and it was reserved for people who were considered a serious threat to Roman rule. Jesus isn’t just in confrontation with his own religious leaders, but with the powers of the world, represented by Rome, the greatest Empire of his day. Taking up the cross isn’t an indication of weakness or defeat, but a sign of battle. He takes the world’s instrument of torture and death, and through it puts to death the values of that world which is opposed to God. He triumphs over death, bringing about the kingdom of God. Hence, what he says at the very end of this passage: ‘Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’ (9.1) (See Colossians 2.15.)

So the battle is won! We might sing that at Easter! But on another level it’s still going on in our lives and the world. Those who represent Jesus have to take up their cross and enter the battle themselves, challenging and seeking to transform the world around. It involves prayer, sharing God’s word with people, drawing them to know Jesus, serving people in need, working for justice and peace, caring for creation – every aspect of the good news of Jesus. But we have to remember that we are not at the centre of it…

Jesus says, ‘Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their life? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their life?’ These words aren’t quite as clear and plain as Jesus’ saying he must die! And I don’t think it helps to try and work out which bits are about this life and which bits are about life after death, although some Bibles use different words in different places. (The NIV suggests this by using the word ‘soul’ rather than ‘life’ in the last two cases.) The Greek word is the same every time. How we live life now can affect our future, whether the future in this world or the next.

Imagine you’re the only person on a beach when suddenly the waves get much higher and very choppy. You see a child alone in the water, struggling. You call the lifeguard quickly. But do you risk going in? If you do, you might drown with the child. But if you don’t, the child might drown, and you could live the rest of your life wondering whether you should have gone in. It’s just one example, of course – you’d need to factor in whether you’re any good at swimming or not. But either way, you could lose your ‘life’.

Jesus says that if we grasp onto life tightly, protecting ourselves and doing things the most comfortable way, we will lose it. But if we give our lives, with all the risks of that – because Jesus is at the centre of things – we will save our lives. We can be dead in this live, or alive after this life. You can be Elon Musk, or Jeff Bezos, or Mark Zuckerberg, and have no life. Or you can be a forgotten person in a refugee camp and have life.

‘What can anyone give in exchange for their life?’ asks Jesus. The answer is ‘nothing’. One way or another, we will eventually leave this life. But Jesus died so that we might have life in all its fullness (see John 10.10).

We are called to see and live life from God’s point of view – God in the centre – and that makes all the difference to life. What can we do in the coming days to live or keep living in that way? What can we do for Jesus and the gospel? What can we do, so that he is not ashamed of us, but glorified through us?

You may like to reflect on the ‘good news’ responses I mentioned earlier: prayer, sharing God’s word with people, drawing them to know Jesus, serving people in need, working for justice and peace, caring for creation. How could those fit into your life and relationships?

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