

Mark 8: 31-38: Bearing Crosses?

In Mark's narrative it is almost like Peter's identification of Jesus as the promised Messiah is a signal. Although we again have Jesus instructing the disciples not to reveal his identity to those outside the group, the next verse tells us that Jesus changes his message. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." This he is telling them is what being the anointed one of God means. It means not the reclaiming of Israel from the Romans but undergoing great suffering. It means being rejected by the leaders of his people. It means death. It seems not triumph and glory but defeat and scandal. And Mark also says, "he said all this quite openly." None of that sound like the good news that Jesus had begun his ministry saying he had come to proclaim. It does not sound like the kingdom of God is coming near at all. Hearing this would have been quite a shock to the disciples. They have been going through the countryside with Jesus; watching as he healed those who came to him; seeing him provide food for thousands from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fishes; witnessed his calming of the sea in a storm. They had seen the power he had been using. Their expectations were that he was a powerful leader who would gather many people to his teachings. He would then re-establish his people and rule over them bringing God's kingdom back to the land. Now he is telling them that is not what the plan is. The disciples are disappointed in this outline of the future course of events. They have left home and family for this outcome? Truth to tell, would we have reacted any differently? Peter is the one who sums up the disciple's reaction by rebuking Jesus for telling them these things. This is an ending to the story that Peter did not want to hear. This is an ending Peter did not want to happen. Of course, we know the complete story so we do not overlook the last detail in what Jesus said. Yes, Jesus now tells them there will be rejection, suffering and death. But from the beginning of this teaching where all these dire things happen Jesus also includes the phrase "and after three days rise again." Peter reacted to the first part of the teaching and seems not hear or maybe to ignore the last. The reality of the disciples' world made rejection, suffering and death very familiar and well understood conditions of life. That was as true in the time of Jesus and the disciples as it is in ours. We understand that the world is broken. Understanding that there would be life after death was not a concept with which the disciples were familiar, so perhaps their focus on the things they understood was reasonable. Peter's response to this teaching about what being the Messiah means is to take Jesus aside and "rebuke" him. As usual, Mark does not supply us with details about what Peter says when he rebukes Jesus but we can assume that it involved a rejection of Jesus' announcement about what was to come. Peter knows that Jesus is powerful, so surely these things would not have to happen. Peter thinks Jesus does not have to take this course. Surely, the Son of Man who has performed all these great things is powerful enough to avoid this outcome and achieve the one that the disciples have envisioned.. I have a book which is titled the *Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel* by Susan Garrett. If you remember Mark's description of the temptation of Jesus when in the wilderness Mark did not detail the temptations. Mark unlike the other gospels does not say that Satan left him. Garrett contends that is because in Mark, the temptations are not confined to the wilderness forty days. She lists this as another temptation which Jesus faced. The temptation voiced by Peter to avoid the path which leads to the suffering and death to be found in Jerusalem. Jesus' response to Peter

which follows Peter's rebuke seems to support this view. "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.'" The point here is that Jesus seems to see what Peter said to him as a temptation; a temptation to choose a different path and avoid pain and death. This recognizes that what Peter believed was true. Jesus did have the power to make a choice which would lead away from what he was beginning to teach the disciples would be the outcome for the Son of Man. The Incarnation is a deep mystery which we proclaim, but do not understand. Fully human: fully divine, both present at the same time in one form. Jesus' humanity would not have wanted to undergo the suffering that his divinity knew was coming. But Jesus made and kept to the choice of self-denial and did indeed undergo great suffering and death. During our Lenten journey we know that the last part of this teaching is fulfilled. We know Easter morning is coming and so perhaps we often fail to appreciate how real this temptation was. We know what choice Jesus made and move quickly past the first part of the teaching to rejoice in the last, shorter section which says on the third day rise again. But Mark and Jesus are not done with the extent of this understanding of what the divine plan is. We are told Jesus continues by adding some more shocking news. "If any want 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 gospel, will save it." This passage about taking up of a cross is an idea which is found throughout Christian history. It has had many interpretations as to its meaning for those who follow Jesus. It has been seen by some as a reason to actively seek martyrdom. Early Christians often actively sought death. Some view it as an instruction to pick some unpleasant task and then endure the suffering. The task may involve suffering, but they pick it without regard for its meaning beyond their own suffering. Some view it as a call to endure something difficult which happens in their life...saying it is a cross God has given them bear. It seems to me that these interpretations miss the point that Jesus was making. Jesus speaks of picking up our crosses as we follow him. This command, this invitation, seems to me best understood in the context of Jesus' actions related not to the actual cross he would later bear, but to the choice he made of self-denial. Jesus' rebuke of Peter said that his mind was on human, not divine things. Jesus' mind was on what was the divine plan. The sacrifice Jesus made was for others. Surely the cross which we are invited to pick up would be the same, a decision—a choice—made not for our own benefit or selfish desire—but for the sake of others and in accordance to God's purpose. If we understand the life that Jesus lived to be not only our gift of salvation through his choice, but also as the model for our living in the present, doesn't it seem that what we are called to do is to look around us and pick up the crosses we see where others are helpless or needy? Aren't we called to seek justice for the oppressed and vulnerable? To aid those who are helpless? Should our cross not be one carried in service to God's plan for humanity? It is not nearly as glamorous or dramatic to think of cross bearing in this way, but perhaps what we are called to do is sacrifice our wants for another's needs. To give up something which we do not really need in order to live according to God's plan for all people to be included in God's abundance. This can be done in many ways by acting in love to help someone instead of pursuing a selfish desire for a moment's pleasure. Instead of watch that TV show we can call someone that might be alone. Instead of throwing out something we no longer want, we might take the time to donate it where it can provide a benefit to someone in need. Instead of

ignoring someone's unkind word or act, we can extend a word of comfort and healing. This does not mean allowing someone to take from you your self-respect because that could lead to abuse. It does not mean giving up your own self respect and dignity. But it does mean moving away from our need for immediate gratification of all our wants to consider how we can offer comfort or aid to someone else. In truth, things which our culture seems determined to glorify and make us think are necessary do not bring us lasting satisfaction. What does make us feel more complete and satisfied is the connection we have to others and that community connection often involves some self denial. To deny yourself in the manner which Jesus denied the self-interest of his humanity is to set aside your own interests in order to determine God's interest in and plan for your life. God will provide you opportunities to follow, but whether or not you see or accept is a choice. This type of cross bearing, the denial of self interest is countercultural and always has been. Yet Jesus calls us to do it. The closing verses of our passage remind us that it is indeed the choice which will bring the greater reward. "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." Self denial after all, is not the human way; the human way is self indulgence. But during Lent, let us think on the ways that we can truly follow our Lord in self denial in accordance with God's purpose for our lives and thus draw closer to the one we follow. Amen.