

Mark 8: 27-38 NOW you tell us!

The gospel of Mark begins with the reader knowing who Jesus is. Mark 1:1.--“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” Yet from the beginning of this brief narrative only the author and the readers of this narrative seem to be aware of this. Throughout Mark’s narrative the disciples are portrayed as clueless. First they do not understand who Jesus is and fail to understand his teachings. Before this passage we consider today, only various demons have recognized and named Jesus as the Son of God. Since the reader of the text is told so early who Jesus is, this creates a tension, a type of suspense narrative as the reader waits for the light to dawn on the men Jesus has called to be his disciples. We are at the midpoint in this gospel’s account of Jesus’ ministry. We have gone through seven chapters where the word Christ has not appeared since that opening declaration. We have been told about Jesus’ ministry. His identity and the authority by which he has done these things have been questioned. There has been a secretive nature to his actions as those who have benefited have been urged to tell no one. There has been no obvious indication that death awaits Jesus as a consequence of his ministry although perhaps the opposition he encounters and the execution of John the Baptist might be a type of foreshadowing. But suddenly the issue of identity becomes just that: an issue. Jesus, as he approaches Caesarea Philippi, a very Roman setting and once the northern boundary of ancient Israel, decides to give the disciples a pop quiz. Jesus asks them two questions. First, who do people say that I am. They are at this borderland and Jesus now wants to discuss his reputation among the people. When the disciples respond listing John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the other prophets of old, these are reasonable answers for them to give. Many of the things Jesus has done— the calling for repentance, the healings, the feeding of the multitude—these are things which evoke the legacy of these figures. As Jesus has done these things they are more dramatic or on a larger scale, but they are still the signs associated with being a prophet or man of God. Because up to this point Jesus has focused on opposing all that oppresses God’s people. Doing these acts he brings healing and wholeness to them as he tells them that the reign of God is near. We are not told which of the disciples offer these first answers. Jesus doesn’t seem really to care what is said among the people as no direct reaction from him is given. Although since he immediately poses the second question, it seems obvious that what is being said about who he is by others is off the mark. The second question is directed to those who have left home and family to follow him. “But who do YOU say that I am?” And this is always the crucial question for any disciple. Who do we say that Jesus is? Whether we read this exchange in its simplest form in Mark or in a longer version in Matthew or Luke it is Peter who gives the answer. “You are the Messiah.” This is surely a high point for Peter as Jesus confirms this by again telling them not to tell anyone of his true identity—Peter has gotten it right. As readers we celebrate with a sense of relief that finally Jesus’ identity is recognized by his followers, the light has dawned, understanding that Jesus is not a prophet but God’s own Messiah, the one chosen and anointed to deliver Israel from oppression. But what happens next shows that although Peter has gotten the title right, he doesn’t seem to grasp what that title means. When Jesus immediately begins to teach them the meaning of his identity—we are told Peter rebukes Jesus. We are so accustomed to the message of Jesus’ crucifixion that it is easy for us to overlook how jarring that disclosure would have been to the disciples. The great hope of the Israelite people at that

time was freedom from the Roman overlords. Everything they had seen Jesus do and heard him say up until now had been impressive and had no doubt given them big hopes for the future. Having witnessed Jesus' miracles, experienced his magnetic personality as they followed him, and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds, it would have been natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility that they lived under with the Romans. And really, don't we want to buy into the vision that Peter has of what the definition of Messiah is. Peter, we, and just about everyone we'll ever know want a strong God, a God who heals our illnesses, provides ample prosperity, guarantees our security, ensures our military success and even gives our sports teams victory, and thus generally keeps us happy, healthy, and wise. But although that is the God we want, it seems that it is not exactly the God we have. Instead of the future free of Rome they were thinking of, Jesus astonishes and dismays them with the news that he would undergo suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders and killed. Mark's narrative doesn't tell us what Peter says to Jesus as a rebuke, but it is evidently that he has expressed those hopes of freedom from Rome and a return to the kingdom of Israel's previous independence and glory. Jesus' response is quite a reversal for Peter. From seeming to have gotten it right, he is now compared to Satan. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you have set your mind not on divine things but on human thoughts." Our lectionary Hebrew Scripture this morning was from Isaiah, but a different passage from the one I read. Hear again God's word from Isaiah 55:8 & 9—"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Peter did not like to hear that his very human expectations were not reality which God was giving to the people. Instead, Jesus is pointing to a God who meets us in vulnerability, suffering and loss. A God who meets us, that is, in those moments when we really need God, when all we have worked for, hoped for, and striven for falls apart and we realize we are quite simply, mortal and incapable of saving ourselves. We desperately are in need of a God who meets us where we are. Jesus' identity to the disciples and also to us is elusive because God shows up just where and when we least expect God to be. God is present with us in our need which means that although we don't get the God we want, we get the God we need. This in no way means that God is not powerful, but it does mean that God's purposes and will are not aligned with human ones. This is the problem now facing Peter. As if that teaching Jesus has just done about the journey to the cross that he will take, Jesus then adds something even more shocking to them. Jesus calls out to the crowd surrounding him and the disciples telling them that following him will require self-sacrifice on their part. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This is the picture Jesus draws of the Christian life, the image for those who are disciples—sacrificing of self. This image is made even more stark with the following verse. "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." When we read this verse we often picture scenes of martyrdom: images of Christians being thrown to the lions, or more recently being beheaded by ISIS. By the way, the original meaning of the word martyr in Greek was witness. The disciples after the resurrection did indeed die because of their witness to Christ's lordship. But this type of life threatening witness is not what we are called to do. So what does this teaching of self sacrifice mean in our lives? What does the language of cross-bearing mean to us? Too often we tend to think of it in terms of denial like

being on a diet. You know, have a little less of the things you like, don't over indulge in the things that make you happy. Is that really what Jesus is talking about? It seems to me that Jesus is suggesting that the things we call "life"; the definition that we have accepted has been packaged and sold by the culture isn't real life at all. It is an illusion. That image makes us think that life is something that we can go out and get, or earn, or buy or win. Jesus is telling us that we must reject that image. Those definitions of life must die in order for us to accept and be born into the abundant life that God wants for us. This life turns out to be like love; it can't be won or earned or bought, only given away. Like love the more you give it away, the more you have. Only when you give away your life for the sake of others do you discover it. Somehow, in thinking about how to fulfill the needs of others your own deepest needs are met. This passage stands at the very center of Mark's story of Jesus and marks the turn from Jesus' teaching and preaching throughout Galilee and the surrounding countryside to the steady march he makes to the cross. In a very real sense, it is the pivot point of the Gospel. This message of Jesus was and still is absolutely and totally counter cultural simply because we live east of Eden, outside the Garden. We live in a world of quid pro quo where what we do is based on what we expect to receive. We live in a world where there is never enough, a world of scarcity where the only thing you can count on is found in the things you own. Jesus' challenges all of that by telling us that the only things we can hold onto are the things we give away: like love and mercy and kindness and compassion. Self denial and cross-bearing are not about being less happy you know. They are about finding out the truth about what happens when you center your life on relationships of equality; not control or dominance. When you spend your time in acts of caring and service, and even in acts of what the world would call "self-sacrifice" when you are caring for another. These things bring a deep sense of purpose and great joy—a real and abundant life that the world around you cannot imagine. Then your ways and thought become more than those "human thoughts" of self interest. When you focus on the teachings of Jesus you can recognize that dying to selfishness is part of the call to follow Jesus. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.