

## Unwelcome News

This passage I just read from Mark's gospel begins after an amazing conversation that Jesus has had with his disciples. Our readings from Mark as we journey through this gospel are a little bit erratic. Mark's gospel boldly opens proclaiming that the narrative is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. In the first chapter it quickly moves to describing his baptism by John the Baptizer, the temptation in the wilderness and his opening call to repent as he begins a ministry in the region of Galilee. We have then jumped forward to read of the Transfiguration and gone back to consider the temptation which was skipped when we read about God's voice identifying Jesus at the Jordan River baptism. The text just before today's passage is the conversation that Jesus initiates with the disciples about his identity. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks them. They give him a variety of possibilities which they have gleaned from the crowds. Some are suggesting he is John the Baptist; while others Elijah; still others, one of the prophets." These are all names taken from the history of the people, names associated with someone considered "a man of God; someone bringing God's word to the people." Jesus, then turns to his disciples and pointedly brings the questions a little closer to home. "He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" And you see that is really the crucial question for them and for us. It is that identity question. Who do we believe that Jesus is. Peter, then comes up with the answer, and it is the right one. Peter responds: "You are the Messiah." This is the good news that we celebrate. It is the reason we come here to worship; it is what we believe we are called to proclaim. We believe Jesus is the one that God has sent to redeem not only Israel, but all of the world. Peter got it right, and Jesus confirms that he is indeed the Messiah. In Mark, we don't get quite the confirmation that appears in either Matthew or Luke, but the disciples are urged to keep this identify of Jesus a secret. They are not to tell anyone about him. This is when Jesus begins to inform them that there is a "catch" to this role of being the anointed one of God, the Messiah. And that is where our actual passage for this morning begins. We begin with Mark 31 which tells us that: "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 be killed, and after three days rise again." He said all this quite openly. Jesus may have said this quite openly, but it certainly wasn't the news that Peter wanted to hear. Peter, and I am sure the others, did not consider this good news. Peter and the others have left home and family to follow Jesus. They thought Jesus being the Messiah that they had been waiting for so long would mean for him and the people of Israel would be good news which would grant restoration to the people...restoration of the Davidic Kingdom. Peter had got the role right but did not comprehend what the role meant. And hearing what the role would mean for Jesus, he did not approve of the plans Jesus had for the role. And Peter being Peter, reacted. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." We are so used to what the message of Jesus' crucifixion means for our redemption that it is easy to overlook just how

jarring that prospect would have been for the disciples. These folks who have identified Jesus as the fulfillment of the great hope of their people at that time; and that great hope was release from their Roman overlords. Having seen Jesus' miracles, experienced his magnetic personality which led them to follow him, and watching him draw enthusiastic crowds to hear him teach, it would have been natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility that they lived under with the Romans. Everything he had done up until this point had been impressive, giving them these great hopes for the future. Now he is saying that contrary to all these hopes and expectations, what lies ahead is suffering, rejection by the religious leaders, suffering and death. This is absolutely unwelcome of news to them. So naturally Peter has to voice his objections and reject this as the outcome of the power Jesus has. We are not told what form this "rebuke" takes, but clearly Jesus is not pleased with this response for he replies "Get behind me, Satan!" This is perhaps an indication that the concept that Peter, and presumably the other disciples have about the role of the Messiah's use of power in this manner is something that is within Jesus' power, but to Jesus it resemble more the "temptations" he faced in the wilderness—than the mission to which he is committed; that mission to use what he was capable of to bring God's kingdom near. Jesus tells Peter, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus is not going to be distracted from the mission that he came to carry out...to call the people to repentance and to demonstrate what obedience to God's reign looks like... what living under kingdom rule would mean...to bring God's kingdom near...and this is where the news seems to become even more unwelcome to Peter and often to us. Jesus calls the crowd that is also with the disciples and begins teaching them about this new way of living. Our passage continues..."and said to them, '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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?' When Jesus calls not only the disciples but also the crowd with them to begin teaching them some of the details about what following him may mean for their life, the description contains some news that calls for a different way of living...a way of living that often runs counter to our natural approach which tends to be self-centered because the first step seems to be "if you want to become my follower, you must deny yourself." Again, that is unwelcome news. We do not like to deny ourselves of the things we want. At this point we have to be very careful with this text because like all verses, they can be misused and abused; especially when coupled with the phrase about taking up a cross. First, let us think about the whole context of Jesus' teachings and call for his disciples; the emphasis he placed on his own actions in relationships. What Jesus desired to be denied was selfishness; self-interest. When he sought to get away from the crowds and they followed him, we read that he saw them and had compassion and then spent the day healing and teaching them. When the disciples sought to send the people away at the

end of a day, Jesus told them to look for their resources and see what could be done to care for the people. Admittedly, it was his power that took five loaves and two fishes and fed the multitude, but he called on his disciples to consider the welfare of the multitude; to look beyond their own self-interest. When Jesus spoke of taking up a cross, the crucifixion was not yet on the mind of the disciples, but connecting a cross with losing life would have been a direct connection as that was use the Roman's made of the cross. However, what Jesus said was related to the concept of answering the call of discipleship and the consequences which may come. As I have mentioned before, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, talks about the cost of discipleship. God does not desire any to suffer. However, there are consequences for sin. There are also sometimes consequences for standing up for justice; for speaking truth to power; for following the teachings of Jesus in a world and culture which does not. Being submissive or allowing abuse in a relationship is not "bearing a cross" is not a situation of which God would approve. That is a twisted use of this text. The relationships which Jesus proposed for all people were couched in terms of love. Jesus resisted, nonviolently, social evils that deformed and defaced human life, and sought liberation for the marginalized and outcast. In other words, the course of Jesus' life and ministry conveyed that humans, rather than God, are the source of suffering. Humans are the crucifiers, not God. Indeed, followers of Jesus are called to name and resist evil as he did, rather than to accept it. And so we have here both the very good news and also the somewhat unwelcome news of what it means that Jesus Christ is our Messiah. And the season of Lent calls us to consider both aspects: the Good news, and it is very Good News is that Jesus is the Messiah; that he resisted all the temptations to us his power present in his divine nature for worldly or human matters; that he remained committed to the mission for which he came to dwell among us and therefore atoned for our disobedience and redeemed all of us in his death and through his resurrection obtained life for us all. The somewhat unwelcome news that as we answer the call to be his followers there is a consequence for our lives and how we should respond: we are called to name and resist evil; to work for justice and correct the social evils that deform and deface human life seeking the abundant life for the marginalized and the outcast...we are called to give up things that are in our self-interest to pursue the things that are in the Lord's interest. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit