

Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

<sup>31</sup> 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 the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> 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.”

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

This passage, which occurs almost exactly halfway in the Gospel of Mark, acts as a significant turning point in the gospel. Up until this point, the gospel has been a sort of buildup... Jesus called the disciples – gathering

around him a group will follow him, who will learn from him, and who, in their turn, will teach of him. Then his Ministry grew - his fame spreading until the crowds he attracted became so huge ... so demanding – that he had to hide from them to get peace and quiet. But still he ministers - casting out demons and performing healing miracles. Throughout the first half of the Gospel there has been a buildup of suspense – as Jesus becomes more and more well known, as his Ministry gains momentum. And during this buildup of suspense, Jesus has played his cards close to his chest – he has not given his disciples or anyone for that matter, any clear indication of what his fate will be, whom he is, or what his Ministry is for. Quite the opposite in fact – he actually commands the demons to silence and asks those who witness or benefit from his miracles to tell no one.

Well all this changes in this passage – the build-up has reached the point where we sense something extraordinary is about to happen. From this point forward, Jesus speaks openly about himself. From this point forward His divinity becomes evidence. And from this point forward, we watch as he walks down that path which inevitably leads to his fate on the cross.

Imagine for a moment like this must have meant to those who followed him – who loved him, who traveled with him. They know that Jesus is special – they have witnessed his acts and they have heard his teachings. But do they yet understand that he is not an ordinary man?

Remember, they are part of that ancient tradition of the Old Testament – they are not yet Christian – there are no Christians until after Christ's death and resurrection. And in the Old Testament, there are many examples of prophets and teachers who have suffered because of their actions and their words. Perhaps that is what they believe Jesus to be – simply the latest in a long tradition of prophets.

Alternatively, there is another role from their tradition that they might believe Jesus in bodies – the Messiah. This certainly would give them a different view of what's his Ministry is about. Most Jews believe that the Messiah would come as the great deliverer – a warrior king like David, but with the wisdom of Solomon. They believe that this Messiah would raise the nation of Israel making it again a kingdom to be reckoned with, rather than the defeated and humiliated nation.

However the disciples saw Jesus – we know that they did not understand what he was saying. How do we know this? Because Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him --- imagine – rebuking – scolding the son of God. Telling him not to speak openly about these matters. None of us would doubt Peter’s motives. He was concerned for his teacher – this man he loved. He wanted to protect him.

But did he miss that last part of the statement – the part that said he would rise again? Surely, that must have given them all some clue that this was an extraordinary situation. To defeat death – to rise again – surely that is the greatest victory of all. Greater than any claim of a prophet – greater than the creation of any earthly kingdom. But Peter’s response suggests he either didn’t hear it or if he did hear it he missed the point.

Christ’s response to Peter is immediate and passionate... get behind me, Satan! Do you not get the impression Christ is more than just a little angry with Peter. So much of our cultural understanding of Jesus is founded on images of him as meek and gentle... the lamb of God. Well that lamb has quite a kick – calling his most trusted disciple Satan! But we shouldn’t be too surprised. This is the same Jesus, who later causes such a disturbance in

the temple – overturning tables – chasing the money lenders out of that most sacred house of worship. In both of these episode we see a Jesus of anger – the Jesus of passion.

And why... why such a passionate response to Peter? Peter, who was, after all, motivated by his love and concern for Jesus. Why? Because Peter just didn't get it. Despite the miracles, despite the exorcisms and the teachings, he just didn't understand what Jesus was all about. He didn't understand who it was he was following. Nor did he really understand what was being asked of him as a follower of Christ. Because Peter was caught inside his human mind and his human experience – he could not see beyond that human perspective - to think about the divine.

But Jesus does not leave Peter to struggle in his ignorance. He mercifully makes clear to Peter – to all the disciples – to the gathered crowd – and to us what his path is and what ours as believers must be. He tells us that we must deny ourselves – that we must put aside our concern for earthly matters – that we must look beyond our limited human perspective. And seek higher matters... divine matters. We must take up our cross and follow him.

And why, why must we do this? So that we too may share in his defeat of death. He says, 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 is a wonderful paradox. We have to give up our life to save it. What does he mean by this statement – does he suggest that his followers must physically die for him... must literally followed him to the cross? For some people that certainly was the case – Peter for one did die, for Christ's sake – for the sake of the gospel. We also know that other disciples suffered martyrdom in the years following Christ's death. But if we limit Christ's words to the notion of physical death, what does this teach us – we comfortable Canadians with our freedom of religion and our rule of law... what does such talk of death in denial has to do with us?

Plenty! He was speaking about ending a way of life – not life itself – but a way of life, for we are limited, as Peter was, to concerns for human things. A life focused on our earthly desires, our earthly needs, our earthly possessions and our earthly powers. It is that sort of life, which we must sacrifice... that we must deny. If we can put that life aside, our human perspective will no longer limit us, but we will instead see things more clearly – we will gain so much more if we do this – if we move beyond our

limited human perspective – we will gain more than we could ever possibly ask for or imagine. We would live a more abundant, happier life. A life founded on divine principles rather than human obsession.

This refocus, is what he is referring to, whether it is the phrase – taking up your cross – or whether it be – losing your life. His teachings are as relevant to us today as the word to those who lived during times of oppression and martyrdom. For then as now, the goal is to alter our perception or our focus. We are in Lent – and the purpose of Lenten sacrifice is not to deny yourself –to make sacrifice simply because it is the thing to do – the purpose is to make a fundamental shift in our perception – our vision. It is meant to keep us focused not on earthly things, but on things divine.

Then, when you change your focus, you will gain your life – a life of richness and abundance that makes your previous life seem dim and shadowy. And you will also receive that most precious reward – the reward of being recognized by the son of God. That is after all, the real reward – not simply a richer and fuller life here on earth – but a promise of an everlasting life – of infinite beauty and love. And eternal life that can only be reached by following the path Jesus took by taking up your cross and

Mapleton Mar 8 2009

following in his footsteps. Then, if you, without shame, lovingly embrace him here on this earth then he will, without shame, lovingly embrace you in that glorious kingdom of God.