

Proper 19 B 2021
Mark 8: 27-38

In an effort to understand what I have heard recently on the news, the bitter acrimony, the willingness to sacrifice human lives over political principal, the soul-searching after nearly twenty years of war, I decided recently to read about another way of thinking about the world and its relationship with God. I have done so because I am as confused about the world and our place in it as the disciples are this morning, those who have stopped their tour of Galilee long enough to take stock of where they are in the minds of the people they have seen. That they should also be forced to confront who they are and who they are following, even their idea of what a Messiah should be and its boundedness with suffering is a shock to their systems. Jesus, however, is clearly uninterested in their expectations. His question to Peter is not about his approval rating but how the people understand him because if they do not understand him, they cannot possibly understand themselves.

It may help to remember that Mark's gospel was written in the shadow of the Jewish rebellion, which pitched the people of Palestine against both their Roman occupiers and against themselves, different warring factions killing each other within Jerusalem's walls over differing expectations of what Jewish identity was. The final brutal occupation by Rome in 70 AD put an end to the slaughter but not to the problem of identity, which is the heart of Jesus's question, "Who do the people say that I am?" Peter tells him the people say he is John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets, but the question, "Who do you say that I am?" is about the disciples' own identity and about who the Messiah should be, something they are unable to square with their hard-earned sense of a Savior as a power to redeem Israel's fortunes. It turns out that Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah is not enough, because it does not include the suffering that Jesus must undergo. By projecting the suffering of a war-torn Palestine onto this hinge in the gospel, Mark makes it clear that all discipleship rests on this idea that the only life worth living will involve taking up one's cross and following him; all Jesus does from this point in the gospel is done with his face set toward Jerusalem and his own cross, with the understanding that discipleship means taking our own crosses seriously.

The issue for Jesus is whether he and the work of the kingdom can be contained in the disciples' terms. For Peter, as for the other disciples, it was uprooting the moral ground to imply that the Messiah would die the death of a slave. Their assumption was that the political and the religious were inseparable, that the Messiah would arrive to reclaim Israel's political fortunes. Jesus' reply to Peter, to "get behind me", is as much a call as it is a rebuke and is a phrase Mark has used only for demons until now. It is a call to follow, to lay aside expectations of ascendancy and do the hard work of this upside-down world he is proclaiming, and to understand that there is a cost involved. To set our face toward Jerusalem, as Jesus will do through the rest of the gospel, means giving up all we know for the promise of a life that saves us but we cannot fully understand, unless it means simply to feel what it is to give up all we had taken for granted and simply to follow, even at the cost of our own lives.

We can debate whether we are a people willing to kill each other over identity, but a lot has happened in the past few years that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. I am not simply talking about the capitol riots, the endless posturing at every level of government. It is about how we see ourselves as Christians in such an environment, especially where some lives appear worth more than others. The book I have been reading about is process thought, begun by a man named Whitehead between the

world wars, a way of thinking about God and the world that has less to do with fixed categories about God than it does about the role of God in an eternal flux of events of which God is as much a part as we are. Sparing you some of the jargon, it does help with some problems. It emphasizes the flow of the world around us and makes clear that there is little, except God, which is permanent. The emphasis is on the fluency of events, that in the flux of the universe, nothing is going to last very long, even pain and cruelty. But there is nothing about an all-knowing, all-merciful God; even the love of God for the world gets short shrift. God is instead the “poet of the world,” leading by persuasion rather than coercion, by a “vision of truth, beauty and goodness.” What it does not contain is an idea of a suffering God, one who shares our condition. Apparently, that part is our responsibility. Even though the suffering can be redeemed, God is not in it with us.

It is hard at every level to deal with this idea of a suffering God; it’s not limited to those of us who have to look it in the face all the time, of cultivating the habit of seeing Jesus in the homeless and very poor. I once attended a Bible study at a clergy conference that had this passage, or rather half of it, as its subject. I was looking forward to it because the bishop (not our bishop) was leading it. He began reading the passage and stopped at the part where Jesus asks the disciples, “But who do you say I am.” The point, I suppose, was to elicit responses about seeing God in the stranger, in the unexpected, you get the idea. There was not a word about suffering being integral to discipleship. Afterwards, there were only compliments to the bishop about facilitating such an eye-opening discussion—clergy tend to behave that way. I will confess I was disappointed. We all want to back away from dissonance. Ask half a question, get half an answer.

As those who are accustomed to living in such dissonance know, it’s not in spiritual gymnastics or great acts of personal sacrifice that we learn what our lives are worth, the lives we tend in fear of losing them, but in the smallest acts that we create space for the kingdom to be built. Following doesn’t ask us to imitate the martyrs or to fill the street-corners with our conspicuous evangelism; first, it asks of us the quiet awareness of those around us, the lonely or forgotten, and our own crosses with which we meet them. In a world that makes an idol of what we know, it is a kind of “learned ignorance”, that saves us, one that demands a continuing refusal to identify God with any concept, theory, document or event. I think it is only when we empty ourselves and take a firm grip on our own crosses, see the divine in the small things we give one another, that we save the life we are promised, one person, one cross at a time.