

“Who do YOU say, that Jesus is?”

Mark 8:27-38 – Sept. 12,'21

Mark's gospel is 16 chapters long and today Gareth read from the 8th chapter, so mathematically we are about ½ through Christ's mission on earth. ½ through what Christ did while he was with us. I know there is more to his life than these 3 years, but we do not know anything about what intervened between the time he stayed in the temple after celebrating the Passover and John's Proclamation (Luke 2:41-52).

Now, I am going to review some of the high lights that have transpired in the first ½ of Mark's gospel. In chapter 1 of Mark we learn that:

- Jesus called some disciples
- A man with an unclean spirit is healed and other healings have taken place in Simon's house
- Jesus spent time praying in a solitary place
- Jesus preached throughout Galilee and a leper was cleansed.

In chapter 2:

- Jesus returned to Capernaum but experienced some difficulties
- A paralytic was healed
- Levi the tax collector is called, Jesus has supper with Levi and some Pharisees asked “Why?”
- Jesus is questioned about fasting and makes the statement that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:37).

In chapter 3:

- Jesus cures a man with a withered hand and asks is it better to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees don't like this and begin to plot against him
- Many people followed Jesus and his disciples and he appointed the 12 Apostles
- The pharisees claim that Jesus is possessed of the devil and Jesus tells the people that “Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.” Mk 3:35.

In chapter 4:

- Jesus tells some parables and their purpose; the mustard seed being one

In chapter 5:

- A demon possessed man is healed, Jesus says a girl thought to be dead is just sleeping and the woman who had been bleeding was cured as she touched his robe

In chapter 6:

- Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, he sends out the 12 to teach and heal, 5,000 are fed on the hillside, he walks on water and more were healed at Gennesaret

In chapter 7 we learn:

- That the Pharisees expected all people to wash their hands before eating but Jesus said, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Mk 7:8
- The Syrophoenician's child is cured and a deaf and mute man is cured.

In chapter 8 we learned:

- That 4,000 people were fed and Jesus reviews with his disciples what he did with the 5,000 and 4,000 and what was left over – much to the chagrin of the Pharisees.
- A blind man was healed

And this brings us to today's reading when Jesus asks two questions. “Who do people say that I am?” which the disciples answer with what they have heard the people say. Jesus then asks, maybe the more important question: “But **who do you say** that I am?” (Mk 8:27,29). And we all know what Peter said.

But hadn't the followers of Jesus seen and heard what he had done previously: preaching, healing and teaching. Had they not seen how the power people; scribes and Pharisees, reacted to this healing and teaching that they interpreted as going against the long-held rules of their society?

Would you have been like Peter and dragged him away from the large group and chastise him for saying something that you think is totally ridiculous.

In today's scripture, we read Jesus speaking openly to his disciples. It didn't matter whether Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees or a Gentile, his enemies or his closest friends, he spoke openly and plainly to everyone.

When Jesus began to speak openly with his disciples about what was to come, they were unable to accept his words. They probably were stunned. Suffering? Rejection? And be killed? No way!

“This simply could not be,” they may have reasoned. “There must be some mistake. We must have heard incorrectly.” Their concept of a messiah did not include suffering, rejection, and murder. Nothing could be more foreign to their understanding. If what the disciples heard was not confusing enough, Jesus then said this, “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.” Mk8:35

What does it mean to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel? We can never discount the literal sense – there are times and places still today where following Jesus puts your life at risk. Yet we also have to understand there are other ways to lose one’s life than the literal one. People lose themselves all the time. You can lose yourself in your work, you can lose yourself in love (I think back to when I was 16 or 18, can you?), you can lose yourself in the moment. People lose their sense of self through addictions or illness or abusive relationships with other people. In the figurative world, there are lots of ways to lose your life.

How do we distinguish what it means to lose your life for Jesus? For one thing, this losing your life for Jesus implies an act of the will. Notice how Jesus returns again and again to the imperative in this passage: Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. This is not decision theology, calling upon the sinner to make a choice for Jesus. Jesus is calling on the redeemed to follow, and telling them the direction the path leads.

Christ himself is at a turning point at this part of the story. At the beginning of this meditation, I reviewed what Christ has done and now he begins to teach what will happen to him in the future. He talks about great suffering, and rejection, and even his own death. He is telling those who are with him, “It’s not an easy path that I have before me. And if you choose to walk it with me, it won’t be easy for you, either.”

Yet he still puts the words out there in the imperative, not the indicative. That is to say, the act of losing yourself for the sake of Christ isn’t just something that happens to you; it’s an act of the redeemed sinner’s will. Following Jesus isn’t the same as having your life stolen away from the outside. The choice to deny yourself is exactly that – a choice, made possible when Jesus has set you free to make such a choice.

The second thing we should remember is the promise that Jesus gives at the end: “Those who lose their life for my sake . . . will save it.” Not every bad thing that happens to us automatically leads to something better. But here Christ promises that the loss of self for his sake, the choice to take up the cross and follow, will lead eventually to a deeper sense of life and self than was ever possible before.

Canadian soldiers risked their lives as they participated in the war in Afghanistan, and during that time some returned home suffering from a condition known as PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder. It’s a genuine concern, and not only for soldiers, but for anyone who suffers a traumatic event in their life. A traumatic event in a person’s life can have their sense of self torn away by the brain’s reaction to the trauma.

What we don’t hear about, nearly as much, is what has been labelled PTG – post-traumatic growth. The truth of the matter is, that some people experience a traumatic event in their life and as a result come through with a deeper sense of self after the trauma is over, than they had before. They have more wisdom, more compassion, more courage, more humility, more of something that wasn’t as strong before they lost themselves in the trauma.

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.

Unlike the disciples, the elders understood and fumed. The priests understood and spit on the ground. The scribes understood and shouted, “Blasphemy!” They grasped his call and knew his mission. And the truth of Jesus’ words was so threatening to the religious and political powers of that time that they decided to kill him. That is just what they did; they looted his clothes, mocked his name, and crucified him.

This leaves us to decide just as the disciples and the crowds had to decide. Jesus asks each one of us, “Who do you say that I am?” The answer and what happens next is up to you and to me. Later, during coffee or engagement time, I invite you to discuss that same question.