

## THE CROSS: JESUS' AND OURS

Reading: Mark 8:31 - 38

According to Mark in his gospel, up until now everything had been going pretty well for Jesus and his disciples, and the disciples must have felt excited and that they were on a roll: healing miracles, miraculous feeding of two large crowds, Jesus calming a storm and walking on water. According to Mark, Jesus had kept away from Jerusalem where there might have been trouble. True, He'd been pretty outspoken over some things. Now Peter suddenly realises in a flash of inspiration: "Heh! This Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the One we've been waiting for!"

And then Jesus messes it up by talking about his death. It says in verse 32 that He spoke plainly, or openly. And in detail: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and must be killed and after three days rise again." By now Jesus obviously knows very clearly what God's plan for Him is. So Peter tries to shut Him up; he pulls Him aside and tells Him off. Peter's got a nerve, hasn't he! He must have been really angry with Jesus to dare to rebuke Him. The word Mark uses for Peter's rebuking of Jesus is the same word used for Jesus silencing demons. And Jesus turns round, back to the disciples, it says, and openly rebukes Peter (the same word for "rebuke"). Jesus will have none of Peter's attempt to silence Him or to talk about it quietly. And it's a stinging rebuke of Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!... You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Peter's attempt to shut Jesus up backfires even more because, it says, Jesus calls the crowd to Him as well as the disciples, and lets rip: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Jesus is saying, "This isn't just for me; it's for you too." And for the first time Jesus mentions a cross and says it's for his followers; He didn't mention the cross when talking about himself.

So this is a huge turning point in Jesus' ministry, according to Mark. And it's all provoked by Peter's declaration: "You are the Messiah!" Jesus doesn't deny it, but He immediately starts teaching them about his death. Jesus is saying very bluntly, "The Messiah you have recognised me as is committed to this world; He is fully human (He calls himself "Son of Man"), and part of that means suffering: suffering to, and including, death. Jesus is presumably so vehement because He recognises in Peter's rebuke a continuation of the temptation in the wilderness when the Devil urged Him to take the easy road.

Jesus is saying that there can be no glory for Him without the Cross. And the same for us as his followers: there can be no short cut to glory. Put crudely, "No pain, no gain."

What does this mean for us?

1/ It means that our faith, if we are Christians, will have to keep coming back to the Cross because that's where we were put right with God and where the only hope for mankind can come from. So we will need to sit in front of the Cross in our minds, to keep on putting ourselves right with God. And our proclamation of the Christian faith must focus on the Cross and what that achieved for all mankind. If we remove the Cross, we have no Christian message. And that message includes Jesus' humanity, his suffering, and his atoning death to take away sin. We can't have a Messiah without mentioning his Cross.

2/ As Christians we will also have a cross to bear ie if we are following Jesus, that will not be all about triumph, but it will include suffering, grief and apparent hopelessness at times. Jesus is very clear: God's plan for Himself led Him through the Cross and out the other side; and his plan for us will be the same: suffering and pain will be part of his plan, but He will be with us in it, and will, if we let Him, use it and transform it - as He did for Jesus. We can't think, "Jesus did the painful bit, leaving us to enjoy the fruit of it without any pain."

3/ A church must in the same way have Jesus' Cross at its heart and will have its own cross to bear ie experience pain at times: possibly relationship problems, shortage of money, arguments, etc. These are NOT signs of a weak church if we face up to them; they are part of God's purpose for a church, and we need God's help to resolve the problems. We go wrong if we expect a church to be like a company which goes from strength to strength year by year; so we have to be careful in setting goals and priorities, not to treat our church like a company. And let's not be discouraged when problems occur!

Jesus struggled but He denied himself and took up his Cross. And He tells us to do the same.

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