

Sunday 14th March 2021
Mark 8:27-9:1
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Come Holy Spirit, lead us in the way of Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit, reveal Jesus to us.

Come Holy Spirit, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name,
Amen.

When you were younger, did you ever play that relay race where you would take two steps forward and then one step back? I remember playing that in the Cub Scouts and it's harder than you think. It's not natural. It doesn't come easy, and so when I was a Scout Leader and playing it with Beaver Scouts, who are younger than Cubs, they would struggle, often bending the rules because they just want to go forward.

I wonder if that's a picture which could capture how you feel or have felt about your faith?

Maybe you were making progress, two steps forward, but then something came along and it forced you to take a step back, and in some cases you might even have taken several steps back.

We imagine the life of faith, don't we, to be a constant, upward, positive journey - forward step after forward step - when the backward steps do come they take us by surprise and, because no one prepared us, and few of us are open enough about our faith, then we struggle and our faith becomes undermined, even in a detrimental way.

I think Peter would know some of that experience himself. Up to this point in the book of Mark, Peter has been watching and listening to Jesus and he, along with the other disciples, has been asking 'Who is this?' "Who is this whom even the wind and the waves obey?" "Who is this who heals and teaches with such authority?"

As they journey with Jesus, they hear what others are saying. They hear the whispers, the rumors, the questions. They've maybe been asking them themselves and slowly, ever so slowly, the pieces start coming together, and Jesus discerns it's the right time to ask a question or two.

"Who do people say I am?" The answer given is largely positive and makes sense but it's not quite there yet, because the crowd hasn't spent as much time with Jesus as the disciples have.

So, Jesus presses them further "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers "You are the Messiah, the Christ?" Well done Peter, two steps forward, you've figured it out!

So, now Jesus begins to teach them the true nature of what it means to be Messiah. He discerns that they are ready to hear this and the way he will go.

We read these words earlier, “Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and after three days rise. Again he spoke plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

The Messiah must die. The way of Jesus is the way of the Cross, and so, Jesus is the Messiah who will give his life for others.

But this is too much for Peter, because Peter, as with all his contemporaries, expected the Messiah to be a king-like figure who would rid Israel of Roman occupation and bring Israel back to its glory days. So, how can Jesus speak of suffering? How can he speak of dying? If he dies he cannot be the true Messiah and so Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter seeks to impose his perspective, his agenda onto Jesus, because Peter's concept of Jesus as Messiah is too narrow.

In the space of a few minutes Peter suddenly takes a backward step and, with the rebuke of Jesus, maybe he even takes a couple of steps back. What's striking here is that it is Jesus who causes Peter to take those steps back. We might say, even, it is Jesus who undermines the faith of Peter. Yet Jesus does this so as to lead Peter to a higher and truer faith. There will come more steps forward but first Peter must step back so that Jesus can help Peter know the Messiah truly.

This has been the case for people across the centuries. Paul would one day say “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

The secret of Jesus identity is not that he was the Messiah but what he came to do as the Messiah, and the way in which he would accomplish this. His way seemed weak, seemed foolish, to many, a backward step, an undermining of faith, but it is the way of Jesus.

Friends, have we recently experienced the backward step of faith ourselves? Maybe because of the pandemic. Where are you going? Maybe because of the changes coming for the Braes churches. Is this really what you want God?

Maybe it's in a personal area of life. Don't you love me God?

Maybe you feel like you've taken a backward step, that your faith has been undermined and it might raise the question of whether belief in this God, belief in Jesus as God, is foolish and weak.

I wonder, in the midst of your questions, in the midst of all you are wrestling with, are you willing to allow Jesus to change your perspective of Him? Are you willing to allow Him to undo the easy answers? Will you allow him to lead you to a higher and truer faith even if difficulties remain or lie ahead?

We too, like Peter, can begin to take steps forward once more, and to do so we simply need to keep journeying with Jesus. We keep giving him our time in prayer, through reading the scriptures, in worship, or solitude. We keep journeying the way of Jesus even amidst the dark night of the soul, and one day, one day light will come, hope will arise, pieces might fit together, not with easy answers, but with a higher and truer faith in Jesus the Messiah who suffered to give his life for you and for me.

In our reading today, Jesus sought not only to mature Peter's faith, the occasion gave Jesus the opportunity to speak to the wider crowd as well, and help them see that He wasn't calling them to a revolution against the Romans, no, His way, the way of the Cross was also for His disciples, for any who would follow Him and seek life through Him. Jesus said "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Forever whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

To follow Jesus and find life through Him, to belong to the way, is to give your life for Jesus. We might think that to follow Jesus is to give our life away for others, after all that's what Jesus did, but this is not what Jesus says, he says "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." Why does Jesus say this? Is he an egotistical Messiah?

Well Jesus taught, in line with the old testament, that the first commandment, the first, is to love the lord your God's with all your being with every area of your life. The second is to love others. And when we get the order of our loves right then we are able to love rightly. As we love God's and receive His love, we can grow then and truer and purer love for others. For as we learn to deny self, as we follow Jesus, then we are better placed to love others sacrificially.

Jesus is not seeking a minor adjustment to our lives. Here we are called to the way of Jesus, to the way of the Cross, but we cannot do that if we do not love Jesus and show that love by giving our lives for Him. What is more, do you know what can happen when we love others first or even seek to do good without reference to Jesus? Well, it can lead us to think we deserve God's blessing. We might think to ourselves "God, I have loved others surely I deserve salvation?" or we might think to ourselves as well "God, I have loved others so why am I facing these difficult times?"

The way of Jesus is the way of the Cross. He is the Messiah who will give His life for others. To follow Him, to follow in the way of Jesus, is to give your life for Jesus. When we get this wrong we build a wrong perspective of Jesus, we put our agenda on Him and we turn Him into a genie God or a slot machine God, a God for the good times and a God who must make our life go our way.

Sometimes when we picture Jesus like this and then experience an event which forces us to take a backward step, we can become stuck in that backward step, I think, maybe because we understood Christianity as something other than loving Jesus first, something other than giving our lives for Him.

This has been a problem across the centuries such that in the 15th century a Christian writer named Thomas à Kempis said this:

“Jesus today has many who love His heavenly kingdom, but few who carry His cross. Plenty of people He finds to share His banquet, few to share His fast. Everyone desires to take part in His rejoicing, but few are willing to suffer anything for His sake. There are many that love Jesus as long as nothing runs counter to them, many that praise and bless Him as long as they receive comfort from Him but, should Jesus hide from them and leave them for a while to draw them into deeper relationship with Himself, they fall to complaining. Those who love Jesus for His own sake, not for the sake of their own comfort. Bless Him in time of trouble and heartache as much as when they are full of consolation.”

Brothers and sisters, we journey with Jesus towards Easter. The Jesus who is Messiah, who would suffer and die as Messiah, came to die as Messiah, and as people who belong to the way, Jesus bids us come follow Him, give our lives, our love to Him, that we might walk in His way and carry our cross in our day.

I pray it may be so,

Amen.