

The life of God

CRACKED WIDE OPEN

Diocesan Lent Course 2021

in the paschal mystery

The suffering, death, resurrection
and glorification of Jesus

Diocese of Chichester Lent Course 2021

Week Two
Bible Notes

The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent, 2021: Following Jesus (Mark 8.31-38)



31 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 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." 34 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. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Notes for Bible Study

Harsh Words?

This Sunday's gospel passage comes between two momentous events: Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8.29-30, i.e. "the Messiah", the Lord's 'anointed one' awaited by many, and from whom liberation and salvation were expected), and the Transfiguration (Mark 9.2-8), when Jesus appeared in glory to Peter, James, and John, and was confirmed by the Father as his Son to whose teaching they should listen.

These words of Jesus are certainly among the most demanding he ever uttered. They must have seemed very harsh for his disciples because for them the notion of a Messiah (and there were many different ways of understanding that) was of something largely triumphant – a victor, political and religious. A "loser-Messiah" was not seen as a possibility. Yet here Jesus seems to teach just that, even if he included the words, "...and after three days rise again" – words they seem not to have heard.

He foretold that he would be rejected by the entire religious establishment!

Peter was clearly scandalized and exercised his usual role as spokesman for the group, this time trying to dissuade Jesus from following the path he had just outlined for himself as the suffering Son of Man. We are told that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him! One can almost see him, paternally putting his hand on Jesus' shoulder to lead him in the opposite direction to what he had just said.

Jesus' response is very enlightening. It is one of the most scathing dismissals we can find in Holy Scripture: "Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Why did Jesus answer him so harshly?

There are surely two reasons:

- First, because had he listened to Peter, he would have abandoned his very mission itself. Peter's voice at that moment was equivalent to that of Satan who had tempted him in the wilderness, trying to make him follow a path of power and domination rather than his appointed one of suffering (c.f. Matthew 4.1-11). To listen to Peter would mean not only disobeying the Father but denying his own self – and not in a good, but in a very bad way.

- Second, we are told that Jesus turned and looked at his disciples. He knew that his coming work – his terrible death and glorious resurrection – was not in any way for his own benefit but for theirs, and ours. The sinless Jesus did not need to lay down his life for any sins of his own, for he had none. Instead he did it as we say in the Creed, "for us and for our salvation."

That is probably why he then directly addressed the crowd along with the disciples. If those closest to him don't get the message (and in Mark's Gospel they often don't), then he must speak to all. That will not stop them still trying to make him in their own image, into a political conqueror, but he will at least have told them the truth.

"The Cost of Discipleship"

Those words come from a book written in 1937 by the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis shortly before the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer and all the other members of the "noble army of martyrs" lived to the death the call that Jesus issued, to take up one's cross and follow him. It is a costly business "for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Revelation 12.11).

That path is still trodden today in various places in the world by Christian martyrs. We may not be called literally to die, but we are still called by Jesus to bear our cross after him. What does that mean?

Bearing the Cross after and with Jesus

It is important in a Reformed Catholic Church such as the Church of England, that we take seriously the Gospel proclaimed by Paul and reaffirmed by the Reformers: the sole sufficiency of Christ in saving us through his death and resurrection and how we receive that simply by faith – faith which issues in works of love. As Prayer C in the Common Worship Holy Communion rite puts it (echoing Cranmer), Jesus, "... made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world...", and he does not need us to repeat or supplement that in any way – we cannot!

Instead he asks us to do two things:

- To embrace and enter it in baptism, and to celebrate it with thanksgiving in our worship, especially in the Eucharist
- Led by the Spirit, to follow Jesus in taking up the cross and to let his mind enter us, as Paul exhorted the Philippians (Philippians 2. 5) not, like Peter on that day in Galilee,

to think only in a human way but to allow God to shape our thinking and feeling in the light of Christ.

Practical Consequences

We do not have to invent crosses. Everyday life presents them in sufficient variety as it is, and often indeed in painful forms: struggles with health, mental and physical, difficulties encountered in family life and relationships, redundancy and lack of job security, tragedy and sudden bereavement, and the onset of old age. All these are opportunities to shoulder the cross and follow after Jesus. They drag us out of ourselves and may often seem to break us, but informed by faith and prayer and joined to his one perfect sacrifice of love they also unite us with the Father and bring about the coming of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In the Early Church, after the age of the martyrs had passed, people spoke of "white martyrdom." Because the word martyr comes from a Greek word meaning "witness" they asked the question, "How can I bear witness without the shedding of blood? How can I die to selfishness and sin in following Jesus, so as to rise to new life with him?" Life itself with all its challenges and suffering, is the very place where we encounter and take up the cross.

It was after all there - from the pierced side of Jesus hanging on the cross - that the new life promised by the Gospel emerged (John 19.34). So it is with us: letting go into God creates space in our lives so that God may indeed be God in us. Jesus knew that this is the heart of the Gospel: hence his stark warning that only by losing one's life can one gain it and that we will be judged when he comes in glory on how we have listened to those words.

Study Questions

- What should such words as success, power, and glory, really mean for Christians?
- How does the Church follow Christ and share in his passion?
- Are there positive and negative ways of receiving these words of Jesus?
- How best do we acquire the mind of Christ and think in a divine rather than simply human way?

Collects for the Second

Sunday of Lent

Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Almighty God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings, and by following in his Way come to share in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

