

Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The graduate school of discipleship

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Mark 8:31-38

31 He 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. **32** He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." **34** Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. **36** What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? **37** Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? **38** If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

I recall leading a group of young people on the theme of 'Following Jesus Christ' and it struck me as most interesting that they were actually taken aback to discover that the early followers of Jesus are only described as 'Christian' on three occasions in the New Testament:

- In Syrian Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26)
- Paul was before King Agrippa and challenged him directly about Paul trying to persuade him to be a Christian (Acts 26:28)
- Interestingly, we read that there were those who suffered 'as a Christian' (1 Peter 4:16)

Immediately following Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was the Christ, we find that the Lord himself teaches just what his title and kingdom really mean.

There is a sense in which this message might be contrary to the expectations of those early followers. It is Peter who once again speaks for the rest of them and expresses protest at the idea that Jesus would suffer and be rejected by the religious leaders of the day – and the Easter happenings of death and resurrection would follow. We are told that he spoke plainly and took Jesus to one side.

Jesus is concerned that Peter has, in our language, 'lost the plot'. He says, "*You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*" (8:33)

Jesus calls together the crowd and the disciples and spoke one of his strongest words.

Mark 8:34-35

“Those who would be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

F F Bruce published a book entitled *Hard Sayings of Jesus*. His reflections upon our text are interesting in that he suggested that these words of Jesus are amongst the hardest of all and he concluded, “No saying could be harder.”

The phrases ‘taking up one’s cross’ or more popularly ‘it is my cross in life to bear ...’ are among the most wrongly applied takes on this text. It becomes a watered-down understanding – for example, some people would talk about:

- an unwelcome experience
- a physical challenge
- an uncongenial companion

The words ‘this is the cross I have to bear’ do not sit comfortably.

All three of the Synoptic Gospels place these words after Peter’s confession and they are used as the first real warning about Jesus’ impending passion.

What our text indicates is fundamental to the message of Jesus, and it occurs more frequently than any other in the gospels; in fact on six occasions. So I think we can conclude that it was a regular utterance of our Saviour.

Mark 8 verses 31-38 contain what we might call a watershed in the gospel narrative.

It would appear that all that has gone before is leading to this moment – and all that follows, flows from it. It certainly becomes the gospel as it is preached in the life of the church. It has two sides to it – one side is a warning and the other side a promise.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote perhaps the finest book on discipleship and, in his *Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” This startling statement is the essence of the radical and uncompromising nature of true Christian discipleship.

When John Stott came to the close of his public ministry, he wrote a book entitled *The Radical Disciple*. Without doubt, this was a farewell book from one of the giants of the twentieth century. By putting those two words ‘radical’ and ‘disciple’ together, he set before us a direct challenge to be serious about the teaching of Jesus and in our following.

Stott suggested to his readers, “Our common way of avoiding radical discipleship is to be selective; choosing those areas in which commitment suits us and staying away from those areas in which it would be costly.”

This writer is correct in drawing our attention to this type of selectivity which marks out far too much Christian living. We have not been given this kind of choice and if Peter correctly confesses who Jesus is – that is the Christ – then what we have is a graduate school of discipleship in which we must all enrol.

A postgraduate course is always an interesting one. You have picked up the basic bachelor’s degree and you are moving on to understand more deeply the theme to which you are applying your mind.

In this school of discipleship, there would be all those things that would seem contrary to the immediate honour and glory that Peter and the disciples might have imagined or hoped would be theirs – that is suffering, shame and death. Peter was so opposed to the idea of a suffering Messiah, that he rebuked Jesus. It would only be after the resurrection and through the gift of the Spirit that they would fully understand the implications of following.

David Watson, the great Anglican leader who died all too young, wrote an outstanding book on discipleship and suggested that this theme sums up Christ's plan for the world and goes on to write, "Yet for all its brilliant simplicity, it is the one approach that most western churches have neglected. Instead we have had reports, commissions, conferences, seminars, missions, crusades, reunion schemes, liturgical reforms – the lot. But very little attention has been given to the meaning of discipleship."

I wonder why it is that so many Christians have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Have we become satisfied with being merely church members, seat fillers, song singers, listeners to sermons, even born again believers or spirit-filled charismatics, rather than choosing to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

Back to Watson, who wrote, "If we were willing to learn the real meaning of discipleship and actually become disciples, the church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering."

We may well be tempted to conclude that this is an exaggerated claim, but one only has to consider the impact of the gospel when let loose in the lives of the first disciples. They were changed from a timid group of men to a community of men and women on fire and fully committed to changing the world.

The impact of the revolution that Christ came to bring is seen when women and men take seriously his call. We must consider the influence of Christianity in poorer parts of the world and we begin to understand something of the revolutionary message that is ours in Christ.

We have lived through some challenging days in our world; we are seeing the growth of other religions and wonder what the future of Christianity might be like. The prospects of the Christian community may well hang in the balance of those who are taking seriously the call to discipleship.

A story is recorded of a young communist who threw out this challenge to a Western Christian, "The gospel is a much more powerful weapon for the renewal of society than is our Marxist philosophy, but all the same it is we who will finally beat you ... We communists do not play with words. We are realists, and seeing that we are determined to achieve our object, we know how to obtain the means ... How could anyone believe in the supreme value of this gospel if you do not practise it, if you do not spread it, and if you sacrifice neither time nor money for it ...? We believe in our communist message, and we are ready to sacrifice everything, even our life ... but you people are afraid to soil your hands."

In recent weeks, we have been dreadfully reminded of the horror of execution and yet being taken to a place of public execution was not unfamiliar in the Roman world of Jesus' day. There is no doubt that the words of Jesus would bring this to mind for those who first heard them. Some would prove the truth in their own lives, as many early disciples would themselves be crucified.

Let me use this text and open up three aspects that naturally fall out of these words:-

YOU CERTAINLY CAN'T SAVE YOUR OWN LIFE

We may want to save our own life, but we can't do that – at least in terms of eternity and the kingdom values of Jesus Christ. *“For those who want to save their life will lose it.”*

We live in a world where people are encouraged to take control of their situation. Indeed at Wesley Mission, we pick up that theme in helping through some of our programs. For example, we use the concept of ‘taking charge of my money’. When people find themselves in a place of debt, they are helped to find ways of getting back on the right track.

However, when it comes to the deepest challenges of all, we know that some things are most certainly outside of our ability to influence their outcome.

I recall not too long ago an adult speaking to a young child and saying, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” The question might well have carried with it the assumption that the child at the tender age of about 9 years could know the answer with certainty – and that this decision was entirely in the child's hands.

An early memory of pastoral ministry was visiting a successful business man who had suffered a heart attack. At the hospital, he said to me, “Keith, this is the first thing that has happened that I didn't make happen.” This is a window into the tragic aspect of living for the fortunate few. We keep in mind the millions who have little choice in what happens to them through life.

Winston Churchill once said, “I have never accepted what many people have kindly said; namely that I inspired the nation and the race dwelling around the globe that had the lion heart. I had the fortune of being called upon to give the roar.”

When talking with very talented people, some are all too aware that self-sufficiency presents little or no answer at all.

The great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, in one address said, “One might better try to sail the Atlantic in a paper boat than to get to heaven with good works.”

If salvation is by works:

- What hope is there for the angry young man or woman in a confused state?
- What hope is there for those who are locked up for their own protection?
- What hope is there for the millions who die of hunger without any real, meaningful life?

WE CAN LOSE OUR LIVES AND FIND OURSELVES SAVED IN CHRIST

Here is one of the unique contributions that the gospels bring to any conversation on salvation. It is picked up by the Apostle Paul who concluded, *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me ...”* (Galatians 2:20)

The significance of our text lies in the most profound paradox – and that is the way to self-fulfilment is the way to self-denial.

John Calvin treated self-denial as the summary of the Christian life. He concluded:

“We are God's; therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

We are God's; towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to whom I have already referred, also wrote his powerful *Letters and Papers from Prison*, as he awaited an inevitable end. He wrote:

“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

Not everyone who has understood this truth has necessarily been some giant or martyr in the Christian story. Think of the woman who devotes her life to raising children in her home; think of the man who is faithfully devoted to his wife journeying through dementia; and the person whose obedience to what is right becomes enormously costly.

We lose ourselves when we are willing to be caught up in something larger than ourselves – and I think this is the truth that Jesus is calling us to understand, for we will lose ourselves and, in doing so, we will find our appointed way.

THE SECRET IS DISCIPLESHIP

We are all called to be graduates in this school of discipleship. The text seems to indicate that a correct answer to the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ is then helpful and indeed the key to answering the question, ‘Who am I?’

We are disciples if we follow Jesus. We are learners in a school that will take a lifetime to complete.

There is an interesting word for those of us who are concerned about offering the good news of salvation and for those who busy themselves in wanting to ‘get saved’. The text offers a stern warning about the preoccupation with saving one’s life, which is very close to a preoccupation with self.

This call of Jesus Christ may appear to cut clean across the grain of conventional wisdom, popular piety and indeed natural inclination.

I have never been attracted to the karaoke experience, but I am led to believe that the Frank Sinatra classic ‘My Way’ is popular all over the world in such settings. It does, however, sit rather uncomfortably with my theme this evening.

The calling of Jesus is far more robust and calls for us to lose our lives for the sake of others and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

I put in my files a letter I received from a well known publisher. It opened in this way: “There is a possibility (for the moment I can say no more than that) but you could be one of the winners in our ‘greatest ever prize draw’.”

This letter had attached to it a label that I had to wear and a telephone number I had to ring. Of course I didn’t call them, but I am led to believe that thousands do!

When many organisations want to attract people to a cause, they believe the way to do it is to make the conditions sound easy and the outcomes grand.

The Anglican Bishop of Tehran had worked for 30 years in Iran before the revolution broke out in February 1979. About a year later an attempt was made on the life of the bishop, but he escaped. However, in May of the same year, their son Bahran was murdered on the outskirts of the city.

Margaret, the bishop's wife, wrote, "I think we have got to be quite clear that following Jesus is not necessarily going to be easy, not necessarily safe. And unless we are ready at the time of difficulty to continue following him, then whatever we say at other times means nothing ...

"Discipleship is deciding to follow Christ and his way. It is very easy to say things and not be sincere about them, but to be really sincere will show when troubles come. When the storm comes is the time that you have really to mean business."