

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 – Mark 8:27-38 (Second Sunday in Lent)**

***‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’***

The scripture reading from Mark’s Gospel today is a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. The moment where it all changes.....and it takes place in Caesarea Philippi, a town about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The town was built in a valley surrounded by hills at the South Western base of the foot of Mount Hermon. The town, since the time of Alexander the Great was a worship centre to the Greek god Pan and years later when the Romans occupied the territory the focus on worship of the Greek gods continued. In the cliff that stood above the town, local people built shrines and temples to Pan. There were also idols to the god Ba’al Hermon too.

As the disciples walked with Jesus through the town, they would have seen all the temples and the idols and the images of the gods and in that pagan setting this is where Jesus chose to ask them a simple question: “Who do you say that I am?”

In the midst of all the gods of the known world – who do you say that I am?

And Peter turns to Jesus and says, “You are the Christ”.

This was a moment of realisation and declaration about the nature of Jesus Christ whom they were following. Jesus doesn't deny it – and you can imagine the disciples would have wanted to announce this good news to everyone and introduce them to the Messiah of God. But Jesus sternly tells them not to tell anyone about him. They probably felt disappointed that they had to keep this a secret. Jesus continued speaking and went on to tell them about how the Son of Man would suffer and be rejected and be killed.

Some dissention will already have built up by the time we come to the part of the scene just as Jesus begins to outline to his disciples the difficult and deadly path that lies before him, a path of suffering, rejection, death and resurrection.

And Peter is indignant about this, and we read that he began to rebuke Jesus. Now I am not sure if Peter heard the part about being raised on the third day or if he got stuck on the words "suffering" and "rejection," but he lost his composure and forgot who was the **Teacher** and who was the **Student**; and proceeded to take Jesus aside to set him straight.

You can picture the scene - It's a bit like arriving in the middle of a family fight or between close friends and if you've ever had that experience – sadly I suspect most of us have – then you probably remember clearly just how tense a situation that can be. You likely also know that words spoken in fiery anger linger long after those who spoke the words wished they could take them back or better yet not have uttered them at all. However, once angry words are out they often live on forever, and this reading is an example of that.

How could things have escalated so quickly? How could Jesus have attacked Peter so viciously, even calling him the evil one?

***Well almost always extreme anxiety or fear underlies anger and that may be at work here.***

But I wonder if the real answer lies in the importance of **this** moment, this critical point at which everything changes, where Jesus' ministry takes a definite turn towards Jerusalem and towards the staggering events that will happen there.

Up until this point everything had been pretty good going for Jesus and his followers. They are happily reflecting on the successful events of the recent past, remembering feeding the huge crowds of people not only with food but with the Word that is the bread of life, the crowds who were in awe at Jesus' healing powers, the excitement of that near-death experience on the lake in the boat. The disciples thought they could see clearly who this man Jesus was and what a glorious future lay before him.

**But Jesus knew differently.** Jesus knew with great clarity and certainty the path that was laid out for him to follow. He could see plainly all the way to Jerusalem, to his betrayal and trial, to a painful death on a cross, and even to the glories beyond. But first that path would lead painfully through humiliation and shame, and the knowledge of that must have been a burden upon Jesus as he shared the happy part of his mission and ministry with his closest disciples.

I am sure many of us have been in that same difficult place, carrying a burden of knowing with clarity unhappy times to come, trying to find the right moment to reveal it to relatives and close friends. I suspect all of us have had that burden at least once in our lives. And to make matters worse it always seems that while we are waiting to find that right moment to reveal our bad news, the people around us are particularly happy in their not knowing the troubles to come, making the burden of revealing the bad news to them even harder. This is clearly one of those moments for Jesus - walking along the road, the disciples close at hand, the crowds tailing along happy and excited.

But in the midst of all this excitement and happiness Jesus reflects upon the dark events that would soon unfold, and so it was necessary that the disciples know that truth also. Jesus began to outline to them what he could see down the road, a painful path that led to the Son of Man being subject to great suffering, rejection, even death, and after three days rise again. He did not spare his disciples, using soft words and hushed whispers. "He said all this quite openly" Mark's gospel tells us.

The disciples were stunned! How could he begin to imagine that such horrible things would or could happen to him, when he clearly was so powerful that nothing could harm him? Could he not see that with such incredible, such divine power in him he was like a god, he was like God himself, was above and beyond being hurt let alone being killed.

And so it was no surprise that Peter, the de facto leader of the disciples, would take Jesus by the arm and lead him off to one side. **"What are you thinking?!" "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy?"** How can you even imagine such things happening to you?

Peter's reaction was not at all uncommon. Many close friends and loved ones react in exactly the same way when someone announces really bad news such as their impending death or other traumatic circumstance. Denials and protestations flow forth in total irrelevance to the seriousness of the moment.

But time was of the essence, and so Jesus not only jumped on Peter for his response but also turned to the crowd and began to urge upon them the importance of understanding what was really important. Impending death or other serious circumstance does that, doesn't it?

Death – whether ours or that of someone close to us - looming in the near future sharpens our perspective on the meaning of life, brings into clear focus what is important and what isn't. The certainty of death coming soon causes us to stop and reflect upon what are our most important values, our essential values.

One of the things that people do when they are contemplating the time they have left is to create what is called a "bucket list" of things they would like to do while they still have time, and such a list reveals what is truly important to them. **Here** Jesus rather forcefully urges Peter, and the other disciples who are watching all to re-assess their essential values.

**"What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"** Jesus demands as he challenges Peter to shift his focus from human things to divine things. And then Jesus called the crowd together so that all could hear, and sternly challenges them in the same way laying out how they also need to determine whether their essential values in life included following him or not.

Now, if we can step back from the somewhat passionate exchange between Jesus and his disciples, – there remains a powerfully positive message here. I believe it is possible for us to hear a message of grace in here.

When we hear this with the ears of those who have already taken up crosses and are following him we can hear clearly “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Here Jesus presents clearly the essence of faith, the essence of life: choosing what is important.

Taking up the cross is not about being tied up in its suffering. Through the cross, God promises that suffering is not the end result. From death on the cross springs a new life, an eternal life, made possible through Jesus’ resurrection. To take up our cross means to live our lives in a way that seeks wholeness and reconciliation for all of God’s children; to be a people who reflect the God we worship and demonstrates God’s love for the world.

We take up the cross when we speak words of compassion rather than words of hate. We take up the cross when we work to make sure children do not go hungry. We take up the cross when we pray for our loved ones, our community, and our world.

The season of Lent is a very appropriate time to pause and to reflect on what our essential values, our spiritual bucket list looks like. It is a truly appropriate time to hear once again those questions and to reflect on the choices that lie before us as we also once again ponder the road to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to the empty tomb.

**Amen**