

Pentecost 18
23/9/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138
Mark 8:31-38

Dying to live

In a sentence:

That the life of Jesus, even the cross, is true life

Our gospel reading for today – the second part of what was set for last week – is often identified as a turning point in the telling of the story of Jesus.

Up to this point in Mark's narrative, the question of Jesus' identity has been constantly in play; now Jesus hears the word 'Messiah' on Peter's lips and seems happy to allow it to go unchallenged – the identity of Jesus is established.

The narrative now turns from establishing Who Jesus *is* to the Whither and Why of Jesus. The confession of Peter, then – (heard last week) – together with the new orientation toward Jerusalem and the cross, are a turning point in the story.

But there is another sense in which this passage is pivotal. This is in that the story is not *merely* a story – an account of what Jesus did, and then did next. What Jesus did and what happens to him is now extended to what will happen to those who would count themselves his disciples: 'those who would follow me must deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow.' This amounts to those disciples 'losing' their life also.

As confronting as it is, we must see that this is not a simple recognition by Jesus of the familiar way of things – that, if he gets whacked, so also will his followers. Suffering by association happens often enough but how the politics might unfold is not a central interest of the gospel; it is only the background.

The link between the cross of Jesus and the cross of his followers speaks to the nature of the work which Jesus does in the first place, and where he does it. The work of Jesus is perhaps *not* best characterised, in the first instance, as 'saving' us. His first work is to live the life of a free human person, open to God and open to those among whom he is placed. We've noted before (e.g., [Sunday July 29 2018](#)) that the cross of Jesus is *not* the point of Jesus' life. Jesus' *life* is the point of his life; this is what an open human life looks like.

The call to follow Jesus, then, is not primarily a call to hard work or to suffering, as if such things in themselves were redemptive and even if it will involve suffering. The call is primarily a call to *life* – eyes and heart wide open to the dangers and the possibilities of a human life, and taking up the richest of those possibilities despite the dangers. Taking up one's cross is *living* – truly, freely, openly, lovingly – in the time and place in which we find ourselves. Anything less than this is what Jesus calls losing our life, even if our hearts are still beating. It is to be a shadow, a hollow casing for an experience which should have been there but has been eroded away by ignorance or fear.

And so today's reading from Mark is a turning point not only because the story changes direction here, but because Jesus' own calling is revealed also to be *our* call. Peter's objection last week – that the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus could not possibly happen – was an objection not only that the Messiah was above all this. Peter rejected any notion that such might also be the fate of Peter himself.

For there is something 'distant' about the Messiah in Peter's unbaptised understanding. For him – and for us whom he represents – the saviour is a 'thing', a prized possession which we hold, a charm which protects us from whatever threatens, an airbag against colliding with life. Such a charm changes *the world* but it does not change *us*. This is what *merely* valuable things do; at best they confirm us but they do not change us.

In a poem fragment from John Donne he speaks of the difference between this and the twist the gospel requires of Peter's understanding; (writing of Christ:)

*He was all gold when He lay down, but rose
All tincture, and doth not alone dispose
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is
Of power to make e'en sinful flesh like his.*

(‘Resurrection, Imperfect’)

‘He was all gold when He lay down’ – that is, as gold, he was a *valuable* thing, a purchase on the world, a security: ‘you are the Messiah, and such things can never happen to you’.

‘...but he rose / All tincture’. A tincture is a substance used to *colour* a metal – to change its appearance. Donne's point is that Jesus is not simply precious – which is what Peter holds. Rather, Jesus makes us *like him*, although not merely in appearance: for Christ does

*...not alone dispose
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is
Of power to make e'en sinful flesh like his.*

The call of Jesus is not that we believe in him, in the sense of believing a thing *about* him. We do not believe merely that he is ‘gold’. The call is to become before God as Jesus himself is before God: to become flesh like his flesh.

If this is the call of God, then it is also the gift of God.

This is why we speak of the church as the body of Christ. The church is not merely ‘a’ body – a body politic. It is *this* body: the body of Jesus. (From the weekly liturgy:) ‘Let us receive what we are, let us become what we receive – the body *of Christ*’: the emphasis – and this is *your* part to emphasise! – falls on those last two words.

Acknowledging that this is not always a comfortable gift, St Paul puts it this way:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8.28; cf. also 2 Corinthians 3.18)

This is not different from what Jesus describes in his talk about taking up our cross. To follow Jesus – even in costly ways – is to begin to look like him, to be free as he is, to be open to God as he is.

To follow Jesus is to have the things we might normally fear – which is death in all its *lived* forms – behind us.

To be growing into such a life, then, is to begin to look like someone who has been raised from the dead.

And when that kind of thing happens, not merely the gospel narrative but the world itself comes to its own turning point, and changes forever.

Let us, then, take up the call to follow wherever Jesus might lead, and watch God transform the world.
