

### **“Not What You Expect” – Mk 8:27-38 – Sept 17/06**

It's really fascinating being a student again. Oh, I've been a student for a while now at VST, but this winter I'm also a student at UBC, where I'm taking a course in Korean language. Being a student at VST is being still deeply within the church world and mindset, and since I'm reasonably well known there I am treated with a fair amount of respect and deference (I blame it on the white beard!) At UBC however I'm just one of thousands of students hustling between classes, tripping over a chaotic collection of bodies on the floors of hallways waiting for the classroom to clear. In my language class of 30 students however there is no hiding, no deference. We each take turns being singled out by sen-seng-nim, the teacher, who calls us out in turn to read aloud. It's a traumatic exercise, and provides a hint of how Peter must have felt on that day that we just read about.

Humiliation? Yes! Shame, even! It doesn't take much imagination to feel Peter's shame, and anguish, and embarrassment, and anger. After all, hadn't he just given the right answer, once again we might add? But when he gave his answer the Teacher had gone a little bit funny, and so Peter, star pupil of the group, quietly brought that to his attention in private. What thanks did he get? No thanks at all, but instead he was deliberately berated in front of the others! Peter must have wondered, "How could he do this to me?"

How, indeed? How could Jesus have attacked Peter so viciously, turning on him in public, ripping him apart with such humiliation, even calling him an evil one? I believe it had everything to do with the importance of this moment, this critical point at which everything changes, where Jesus' ministry takes an abrupt turn towards Jerusalem, and towards the staggering events that will happen there.

After all, up until now everything has been fairly rosy for Jesus and his band of followers. From a modest start in the Jordan River his mission and ministry grew steadily, as one by one and two by two Jesus called particular people into close association, to become not merely his students and followers but the core upon which he would rely. The crowds spontaneously assembled to hear him preach and teach, gathering to be fed on his miracles and on his words. The adoring crowds brought to Jesus those who were in need, and they watched him heal their sick, making the deaf to hear and the lame to walk and the blind to see, and even those with eyes could begin to see the power of God at work in him. Even the disciples thought they could see clearly who this strange man 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. Jesus 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.

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 behind, a babbling bubble of excitement and happiness in the Mediterranean sunshine. The disciples are happily reflecting on the successful events of the recent past, remembering feeding teeming crowds not only with morsels of food but with the word that is the bread of life, absorbing the adulation of the crowds who recoiled in awe at Jesus' healing powers, the excitement of that near-death experience on the lake in the boat. And then Jesus calls them to come closer and opens this most serious of discussions with a seemingly innocent question, "who do people

say that I am?" Who indeed? Certainly there must have been a flood of answers. The more trivial ones have been lost; the more serious and relevant ones stand out like flags: some say "John the Baptist", whose fame and reputation continued to spread long after his death in prison; others say Elijah, returned from Heaven, and yet others say one of the prophets, also risen from being long dead. These are all good answers, none of them to be sneered at or mocked. Jesus, who so clearly displayed the power of God present and at work in him just had to be one of God's special people.

Now those may be fine answers for the people at large to give, but his students and disciples should know better, and they seem to. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus persists, giving a hint that their answer should be more significant, more meaningful, and closer to the truth. You can almost hear a bit of hesitation, maybe a whispered consultation among them as his star students seek for the answer they know he already has in mind. As usual, it is Peter who steps forward to take the risk: "you are the Messiah" he offers. The Anointed One, the chosen one of God promised to come and rule God's kingdom. Peter sees Jesus as the one with clear power and might, who would enforce the rules of the kingdom with majesty and sternness and severity, ruling with the unquestioned and unquestionable power and authority of God himself. All of that power, and authority, and responsibility for judgment dripping from that one word like the anointing oil running down the forehead of the christos, the messiah, the chosen one.

That was the opening that Jesus sought, and used as a teaching moment, as he 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. And he did not spare his disciples, using soft words and hushed whispers. "He said all this quite openly", discussing it like it was the most natural thing in the world, seemingly oblivious to the mind-bending contrast that this horrible picture made with the disciples' images of power and glory.

The disciples were stunned! How could he talk this way?! 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, and was above and beyond being hurt, let alone being killed. And so it was no surprise that Peter, de facto leader of the band of students, would take Jesus by the arm and lead him off to one side. "What are you thinking?!" Peter began, boldly taking it upon himself to rebuke the teacher, to help Jesus see the obvious error of his ways. Can't you just hear Peter upbraiding Jesus, "What's the matter with you? Are you losing it? How can you even imagine such things happening to you? What nonsense! You'll lose all the good will you've built up so far if you start pushing such crazy ideas!"

Shocking, isn't it? We can barely imagine anyone speaking to Jesus like that! But if we pause and reflect for a moment we can see that many in the Christian faith today are still trying to do exactly that. They start with a preconceived concept of Jesus as a kingly Messiah, a ruler of majesty and power and might, and then they rework Jesus until he looks like a warrior king, smiting with lightning bolts and horrible fates any who would question his authority, chopping down and throwing into the fire any who would have the least hesitation to bow down deep enough, or quickly enough, or to smile prettily enough. There are still huge numbers of Christians today who see and hear the stories of Jesus displaying God's power at work in him and can only see a stern and wrathful John the Baptist, or a fiery angry prophet like Elijah wielding the power of God like some kind of divine light saber, whrumm, whrumm, slicing off the heads of any who would even think bad thoughts.

What irony that those like Peter who would try to cast Jesus in the role of a wrathful and untouchable Messiah would also feel the humiliation of his wrath and scorn. Peter took Jesus aside, tried to straighten him out in private, but Jesus would have none of such hidden agendas. Jesus instead turned away from the hidden huddle into which Peter had herded him, and speaking clearly for all the disciples to hear plainly rebuked Peter publicly in the harshest possible way. "Get behind me, Satan!"

Jesus proclaimed. “Don’t try to corrupt me, evil one, for you are setting your mind on human things” “You are corrupted by the worldly view of power, and how people treat each other for their own gain”, is another way to put it.

And then Jesus called the crowd together so that all could hear, and explained to them that he was not the kind of Messiah they expected. Quite the opposite of a fire-breathing kingly figure that blasted all into submission through fearful displays of vengeance and wrath, Jesus declared that if any wanted to follow him they would have to follow his example of self-denial, of putting the needs and wants of others first, of carrying the burdens of others as he would carry the burdens of the world on the cross. Echoing the model of divine sacrifice that he would himself display at the end of that road to Jerusalem, Jesus instructed them that any who would wish to save their lives through self-determination, working in their own strength, would lose their lives; but any who would lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the good news that he brought would save their life. “What can you give in return for your life?”, he asked the crowd, and the answer of course is that there is nothing we can offer that is sufficient, except giving ourselves in response to his magnificent gift of life, a gift proclaimed and sealed in his rising again on the third day, just as he had told them he would.

That seems to be the part that Peter, and the other disciples, missed when Jesus told them the Son of Man would suffer, and be rejected, and killed. Oh yes, He did tell them that he would rise again on the third day, but they didn’t hear that part. I don’t think we should be too hard on them for missing that crucial part of his prediction, because it was so startlingly new that they had no images with which to understand it. We have no such excuse. With the story of the resurrection of Jesus ringing sweetly in our ears every Easter Sunday, and indeed every Sunday, we are constantly reminded that Jesus did, as he said he would, indeed rise again victorious on that third day, sealing for all time the validity of his role as Messiah.

How then, with the evidence of all he had foretold coming true and being proclaimed over two thousand years, can we miss the rest of what he said? How can those who beat their chests as examples of faith in him ignore his declaration that there is nothing, not even the purest of faith that we can offer to save our own life? The life we live, the life of abundance he promised, the eternal life he assured with his very rising victorious over even death itself, these are all gifts from God in his Son, the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus. Gifts offered to us in exchange for our surrender, our offering of ourselves in his service, proclaiming the good news of those gifts through our lives.

“If anyone would follow me”, Jesus said, after blowing to bits Peter’s view of his role of Messiah, “let them deny themselves, and take up their cross”. Jesus presented himself to them as a Messiah that was so totally not what they expected, a king who would lay down his own life to preserve the lives of his servants.

To Peter’s credit, and to the credit of the rest of the disciples, and indeed to the credit of untold millions of faithful Christians, they did in turn take up their crosses, and follow him. And now the mantle is passed to us, and it is our turn to follow Jesus. It’s our happy turn to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, to gain our lives by losing them serving him. This doesn’t mean hanging ourselves on meat hooks as they do in some parts of the world. Neither does this mean dragging ourselves off into gloomy isolation in some wordless monastery. Not even does this mean that we have to spend our lives beating up on ourselves, groveling in abject self-abuse. What it does mean is that we are called to see Jesus not as some divine warrior-God wreaking havoc and chaos, but to see and to emulate his self-giving love, a love fueled by God, and manifest in Jesus’ caring, healing, supporting actions, actions that culminated in his once-and-for-all ultimate sacrifice on our behalf, dying and rising again to set us free, and to give us life abundant. Thanks be to God for his Messiah who was not what you’d expect, a Messiah full of grace, even Jesus Christ our Lord.