

The Cross and the Kingdom

Mark 8: 31-9:1

We live in a world where success is the thing that counts. Whether it's a matter of academic achievement, sport or business, no one goes round saying that failure is a good thing! In our world, success matters. But here we see Jesus apparently saying precisely the opposite. At the beginning of this section of Mark's gospel, Peter has just become the first person to grasp that Jesus is indeed God's chosen one, the Messiah, rather than just some prophet or inspired religious leader; yet immediately afterwards Jesus is speaking about his impending and inevitable death. It just doesn't seem to fit.

You see as far as Peter and the entire Jewish nation was concerned, Messiahs were not supposed to die – and least of all an ignominious criminal's death! Messiahs were meant to be victorious and *successful*. They were meant to cleanse Israel from injustice and sin, and to sort out her enemies, preferably with great power and glory, in order to demonstrate the supremacy of God over the lesser gods of other nations. Being Messiah was all about success and not failure – so what on earth was Jesus talking about?

And the same kind of confusion still reigns in the minds of many people today. There are countless people who admire Jesus as a great moral teacher and a great teacher about God, as well as a healer and worker of miracles, but they can't get their heads round the importance of his *death*. That doesn't seem to make sense, except maybe as a prelude to his final miracle, that of rising from the dead, which at least has the merit of marking Jesus out to be someone special...

But as far as Jesus is concerned, his death is absolutely crucial. It cannot be left on one side as merely peripheral. Rather it takes us to the very heart of what Jesus was about. Its significance is emphasised in the gospels in that they devote almost a third of their whole length to giving an account of Jesus' death and the events surrounding it.

When I have met with people over the years to prepare for the baptism of their children, this is often one of the things they find hardest – to make sense of why Jesus' death is so important. And to get to the bottom of that question, we need to understand why Jesus came to earth: he came not merely to teach about God (there were plenty of prophets who had done that and who had said pretty much the same as Jesus) but actually to deal with the problem of the mess we make of our lives and our world, and to meet our need both for forgiveness and for the power to live differently. That in essence is what his proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom was all about.

Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that it's so difficult for people to get hold of this idea about the significance of Jesus' death – after all as we know from our reading Peter himself found it impossible at first. He just couldn't get his head round the idea that Jesus actually HAD to die – that this was in fact to be the fulfilment and the centrepiece of what he had come to do on earth. It was only after Jesus' resurrection that the disciples really began to piece together the meaning of it all – and finally came to understand that Jesus' death was in fact the most important thing that he had done or that anyone in fact had ever done.

As we look at this passage, this is the first thing that we need to grasp. Namely that Jesus came to *die* – but above all that he came to die with a purpose – that of dealing

with the problem of the endemic disease of human sin, by providing a cure in terms both of forgiveness and of the power for human beings to live differently.

I wonder: have we grasped that this is what Jesus was really about? Not just teaching about God and about how to live, not just healing people physically or doing other miracles – but providing the answer to our most deep-seated human problem – the problem of the disordered, disastrous state of the human heart and our need of both forgiveness and new life through the power of God. That is what Jesus offers to us first and foremost – and if we haven't grasped that yet, then we are in a very real sense missing the point.

So, that's the first thing that's going on in this passage. Peter and the disciples are learning that Jesus actually came to die. He is indeed God's chosen one, the Messiah, but not in the way they thought – but rather in God's way, the way of the Cross. But there is another dimension to this passage that is also vitally important for us as Christians – and that's what Jesus goes on to teach his disciples about what it means *to follow him*. And that's pretty uncomfortable stuff too! Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

To most people's ears this sounds crazy. Our whole culture is built on the idea that you put yourself first. Self-fulfilment, self-realisation, self-actualisation – these are the kind of words that people use today. There is a whole industry of books and guides and endless on-line resources built on these ideas. By contrast, this religious teacher from 2000 years ago is saying that we have to deny ourselves and take up a cross if we want to find our true selves! It doesn't sound like a message that would sell too well in today's high streets or on the internet.

But Jesus' teaching here actually fits together perfectly with the reason he came to earth and the reason he had to die on the Cross. It is human self-assertion – human pride and arrogance – that are the root of the world's problems and the cause of so many of its ills. What Jesus came to do was to break the cycle of sin and self-assertion once and for all and to inaugurate a new way of living that he called the "kingdom of God." He warned the people of Israel that if they went on fighting and trying to overthrow the Romans then one day they would be crushed by the power of Rome – which is precisely what happened in AD 69 when Jerusalem was razed to the ground.

What Jesus did on the Cross was to reverse the cycle of self-assertion and violence that had begun with Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. He took into the very heart of God all of the things that threaten to destroy us human beings, including our relationships with God and with one another – and it literally killed him in the process. It took him to the depths of hell and separation from God – precisely so that we do not have to go there. And now he calls us to live in the same kind of way that he lived. To forego our insistence on being first and on coming out on top – and to learn instead a new way of living, modelled on the way of the Cross: a life of self-denial, in the spirit also of St David of course, whose monks had to pull their own ploughs and were restricted to a diet of bread and water. Though I think we will probably do rather better in Hall later on - *hopefully!*

The myth of the need to put ourselves first is a very powerful one – and it's one that is at the root of western consumer culture. It's a myth that often infiltrates the church and the lives of Christians too. We may dress it up in the language of spirituality and holiness – but our motivation is all too often that of getting our own way. We want things to be the way we want them – and we use all kinds of tricks to make sure we do. But we fail to notice in the process that the way we are trying to get our own way and the manner in which we regard and treat others is actually the very *opposite* of walking the way of the Cross.

I think this is one of the biggest problems in the church today, not just locally but nationally and internationally – that too many of us think we know how things ought to be and then think it's our duty and responsibility to make these things happen. But the problem lies in how we go about it – whether it's over an issue like the ordination of women bishops or the colour of the church carpet! The problem lies in the fact that we fail to see that the *real* problem, the real obstacle to God's working in us and through us is *the way we are*. You see, Peter and the disciples needed to learn not only *where* Jesus was going (namely to the Cross) – they also needed to learn what it meant to *walk in the way of the Cross* – to deny themselves, to take up their cross and to follow him.

If we are to move forward and to grow as Christians, individually and corporately, then we need to learn to walk the way of the cross. Many of us are used to getting our own way in our places of work or wherever it may be. We are people who are used to making things happen: that's probably part of what got us here to Oxford in the first place! And in many ways that is great – it means we bring energy and determination to whatever we do, and often we achieve great things. But the danger is that we can end up riding rough-shod over others and ironically frustrating the purposes of God even as we try to serve him.

I took part in a fascinating debate the other night with a leading Muslim scholar and Imam – in the heart of Dewsbury in West Yorkshire, which is a deeply segregated community in which racial tensions could easily erupt if we don't find better ways of building relationships and of working together. Shaykh Fuad Nahdi said that the only way he could see out of the problems we have made for ourselves between different ethnic and religious communities, locally and internationally, is *for people of faith to exercise the gift of forgiveness and to reach out in love to those from whom we feel divided*. He had recommended in an article in The Guardian some years ago that instead of bombing villages in Afghanistan, the West should have dropped vast quantities of sweets, toys, food and clothes. He said people called him a "Muslim hippy" and dismissed the idea as nonsense. But isn't this very close to the New Testament's challenge to love our enemies, to feed them when they are hungry and to give them water when they are thirsty? And is this not the subversive way of the Cross and of the Kingdom of God?

We need to allow God to work in us – to change us into the likeness of Christ – so that he can the more work through us. We need to learn what Jesus means when he says: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Amen.