

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 28th February, 2021.

Second Sunday of Lent.

Rev David Swales

Mark 8.31-38 *Why on earth would anyone follow Jesus?*

Why on earth would anyone follow Jesus?

He had a pretty lousy recruiting strategy: “If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me”. And, make no mistake, those early hearers knew the meaning of ‘carrying your cross’ – they had seen enough poor wretches on their way to the appalling death of crucifixion to understand what Jesus was asking of them.

And yet, starting out with a small bunch of twelve followers, by the end of three short years, that figure had grown to several hundreds – maybe thousands. And in the years which followed the number kept increasing, exponentially, as the early church grew across the known world.

And that growth has never stopped, meaning that over the centuries, right to today, countless billions have chosen – chosen – to follow him.

But why? After all, he couldn’t be clearer, it won’t be easy. And many have found that to be true. Most of those twelve disciples, large numbers in the early church, and untold numbers through the next two thousand years, paid with their lives for their faith in him.

And that is to say nothing of persecuted Christians in the world today. The charity Open Doors keeps a ‘Watch List’ of the top 50 countries where it is difficult and dangerous to be a Christian – from the top two, North Korea and Afghanistan, to 49 Kenya and 50 Comoros. The stories of everything from injustice and discrimination to torture and death are devastating – 4,761 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons last year. But, here’s the thing, many of these persecuted Christians could spare themselves all this horror if they renounced their faith in Jesus – or never followed him in the first place – and yet still they persevere, and still new believers join them.

So, why do they follow?

You can find answers in the words of many of those Christians; read their stories in the materials produced by Open Doors or Barnabas Fund – both of which we support as a church.

But let's see if we can also find answers in today's passage of scripture.

Just before the events of our reading, Jesus' disciples had reached a turning point. Prompted by Jesus, the disciples, led by Peter as spokesman, finally recognised their friend and leader, Jesus, to be none other than God's Messiah. They've discovered that he is God's chosen one, awaited through the ages; 'Son of the living God' – as Peter puts it.

Now, for the disciples, the good has just got even better. Jesus is already a superstar, drawing crowds wherever he goes. And people don't go away disappointed, either; they have their lives changed, by his healing, and by his teaching about God's kingdom of grace and peace. And there they are, right at the heart of the action. Surely it can only go from strength to strength! And now they find that they are disciples of the Messiah, the Christ, himself. So it can only be a matter of time before he takes over as the just and gentle ruler people are longing for: and they'll be right there by his side.

And this is the moment which Jesus chooses to throw a massive bucket of cold water on all those plans and hopes.

"The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law.

"He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life."

And Mark adds, 'He made this very clear to them'.

Peter is still glowing with pride, as Jesus has just commended him for being the one to recognise him as Messiah. Maybe that is why he feels bold enough to speak out now, and insist to Jesus that this must never happen. The reaction he gets couldn't be more different than a few minutes earlier:

'Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. "Get away from me, Satan," he said. "Your thoughts don't come from God but from human nature!"'

Poor Peter, we say – he meant well. Why such a fierce reaction?

A few weeks ago I spoke about developing eyes of faith, learning to see God at work, to see his blessings, even in small things. We need to learn to put on God's spectacles, see things as he sees them: if we do, they may look very different.

And Jesus is saying the same thing to Peter here: "Your thoughts don't come from God but from human nature!"

You can see where Peter is going, motivated by a desire to protect his friend: 'Why allow this to happen? Jesus has used his power to save others, from death, despair, disease, disability; why not use a bit of it to look after himself?' But can't you just hear the echoes of the devil's temptations we looked at last week? No wonder Jesus says to Peter, "Get away from me, Satan".

"The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law", says Jesus. If he had let him, Peter would no doubt go on to suggest that Jesus tone down his teaching, maybe stop criticising the authorities so much, come to an understanding with them. Jesus knows that is not the way: those authorities are misrepresenting God and his grace; Jesus must oppose, not appease, them.

Are we sometimes tempted to compromise with things we know are wrong, rather than stand out for God's way? To that Jesus says, "If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

But it's not just about not compromising. There's an important word which Jesus uses; The Son of Man *must* suffer much and be rejected... Mark puts this word, 'must', in Jesus' mouth a number of times. In the end, Jesus will die, not because the religious authorities wish it to happen, but because it is God's will.

'In fact', Jesus might have said, 'you know that glorious vision you all have? Of me becoming King, bringing in a kingdom of justice and joy? This is how it happens. This is how God will extend salvation to all people, for all time; through my death, and resurrection.

Paul would write later about God's foolishness - the foolishness of the cross. But God's foolishness, he wrote, is far wiser than man's wisdom. "Your thoughts, Peter, don't come from God but from human nature!"

We understand that now. But I doubt his words made much sense to the disciples, they were still reeling from the shock of them. All they could do at this moment, as

sometimes we have to do, was just accept that God knows what he is doing, even when everything seems to be going wrong.

But still, why did they stay with him, despite their misgivings? Well, of course, there were those, beyond the twelve, who followed Jesus for a while, but fell away when the going got tough, or when they became disillusioned. On one occasion Jesus said to the twelve, will you also leave me? Their reply was, “Master, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!”

I’m sure this is exactly the reason that our persecuted brothers and sisters would give if you asked them, Why do you continue in your Christian faith when it costs you so much? Have a look at the Open Doors Watch List – it’s more than just facts and figures: for each country they give at least one human story as an example; and in each one, for all the suffering they encounter, the joy, hope and peace they find in Jesus ring through.

In fact, they are discovering the wonderful truth of Jesus’ words here; “if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it”.

And we shouldn’t look at this as only applying to Jesus’ followers in faraway places or in ancient times. That wonderful truth, that glorious promise, applies to us, too. But so do those difficult and challenging words – that ‘recruiting slogan’: Jesus said, “If *any of you* want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me”.