



The Way of the Cross.

Mark 8:27—38

Mark's gospel presents Jesus as the suffering servant who dies for the sins of God's children. The cross is at the center of Mark's understanding of Jesus. In fact, one-third of Mark's whole gospel is dedicated to the story of the cross.

Opening Question

When you see the cross, do you see a shameful symbol or a victorious symbol?

When you imagine God, do you see a God who is all powerful or a God who is weak, vulnerable and abused?

**the crucified Jesus
is
the image of the
invisible God.**

Jürgen Moltmann

Study

Read Mark 8:27—30

This passage brings together three of Mark's favorite themes: who Jesus is, what he has come to do, and what he requires of his followers. The story is a turning point in the Gospel — and a turning point in Jesus' journey to the cross.

- Look at verses 8:27—30. What is the general public opinion of Jesus? What is the opinion that Peter gives? Contrast these opinions.
- How do you account for the differences in opinion?
- Wonder why Jesus asks "who am I" instead of "what have I come to do"? Why is the question "Who am I?" important?

Comment

Jesus knows there is a difference between the people's public perceptions of his identity and the apostles' private, dawning conviction. According to public opinion, he is John the Baptist, Elijah or another prophet; according to the Twelve, he is not another prophet but 'the Christ', the fulfillment of all prophecy.

One explanation offered by scholars for Jesus' warning not to tell anyone is that Jesus is trying to avoid widely held ideas about God's Messiah — especially since the prevailing view at the time was that God's Messiah would overthrow the Roman occupation, by force of violence if necessary, in order to establish God's kingdom on earth. Especially among Zealots, the Messianic cause was a revolutionary movement.

As the story continues, it becomes clear that Jesus' description of a crucified Messiah was not what anyone — his disciples included — had in mind.

Study

Read Mark 8:31—33

- What is Jesus' direct message to his disciples?
- What two fierce reactions quickly follow?
- Peter has the understandable desire to save Jesus from suffering and death. **Turn to** Matt. 4:8—10, where Jesus uses the same language with the Devil in the wilderness that he uses here with Peter. In the wilderness, the Devil attempted to offer Jesus a short cut to the glory of the kingdom. What connections can you make between Jesus' words to the Devil in Matthew's gospel and his words to Peter here in Mark's story? How can Jesus go to the extreme of equating Peter's efforts with the efforts of Satan?

He who proclaimed that the kingdom was near died abandoned by God.

He who anticipated the future of God in miracles and in casting out demons died helpless on the cross.

He who revealed the righteousness of God with an authority greater than Moses died according to the provision of the law as a blasphemer.

He who spread the love of God in his fellowship with the poor and the sinners met his end between two criminals on the cross."

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Pause

Jesus speaks openly and plainly about the way that he is going — it is the way of the cross — the *Via Dolorosa* (Way of Sorrows). When you look at the mess in our world — injustice and suffering and violence — what kind of a God do you want:

A Victor or a Victim?

Study

Read Mark 8:34—38

- How does Jesus' audience change at this point (v. 34)?
- What paradoxes or apparent contradictions do you find in this passage?
- Which of Jesus' statements in this passage strikes you as most difficult, and why?

Jesus moves at once from his cross to ours, and he portrays Christian discipleship in terms of self-denial and even death. Christian discipleship is much more radical than a set of beliefs, good works and religious practices. No imagery can do it justice, except for death and resurrection. For when we lose ourselves we find ourselves, and when we die we live.

Reflect

- When have you experienced the truth of saving your life by losing it (v. 35)?
- In what areas are you still clinging to your own life, and with what expectations?

To take up our cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, is 'to put oneself into the position of a condemned man on his way to execution'. (H.B. Swete). For if we are following Jesus with a cross on our shoulder, there is only one place to which we are going: the place of crucifixion. As Bonhoeffer puts it, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die'. Our 'cross', then, is not an irritable husband or a cantankerous wife. It is instead the symbol of death to the self. ... The traditional word for this is 'mortification'; it is the sustained determination by the power of the Holy Spirit to 'put to death the misdeeds of the body', so that through this death we may live in fellowship with God. (Rom. 8:13).

— John Stott

Theological Reflection

Peter Abelard (1079—1142) on the Love of Christ

Peter Abelard's views the cross 2 ways: as both the embodiment of God's love and as the example of how Jesus' followers are called to love.

“Love is increased by the faith which we have concerning Christ because, on account of the belief that God in Christ has united our human nature to himself, and by suffering in that same nature has demonstrated to us that supreme love of which Christ himself speaks: “Greater love has no one than this” (John 15:13). We are thus joined through his grace to him and our neighbor by an unbreakable bond of love ... Just as all have sinned, so they are justified without respect of person by this supreme grace which has been made know to us by God. And this is what [Paul] declares: “For all have sinned and all need the grace of God” (Rom. 3:23), that is, they need to glorify the Lord as a matter of obligation ... Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this singular act of grace made know in us (in that his Son has taken our nature on himself, and persevered in his nature, and taught us by both word and his example, even to the point of death) he has more fully bound us to himself by love. **As a result, our hearts should be set on fire by such a gift of divine grace, and true love should not hold back from suffering anything for his sake** ... Therefore, our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear — love for him who has shown us such grace that no greater can be found.” (emphasis added)

Reflection Question:

Imagine if God's Messiah (Jesus the Christ) triumphed in power rather than by suffering in love. What would be lost in our understanding of the love of God in Jesus if there were no cross?

