

... for he was teaching his disciples

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Psalm 54

James 3:13—4:3, 7–8a

Mark 9:30–37

Text: Mark 9:30-31

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’

Introduction

What ever happened to the instruction manual? I recall a time—perhaps my age is showing—when upon the purchase of some new device from a watch to a washing machine they came with an instruction manual. I didn’t always read the manual but at least I had one to fall back on. Now, I am finding that most new devices come only with something called a ‘quick-start-guide,’ if anything at all. Do you find the ‘quick-start-guide’ launches you at lightning speed in the operation of your new device? And if you call for help you are told you can find a manual on line. I bought a watch recently and in it was a tiny piece of paper with pictures on it, presumably guiding me through the functions of the watch. It took some effort of trial and error to figure out what the pictures indicated.

A question I invite you to ponder is this, is anything in life self-evident? You may say that some things are instinctual—perhaps breathing is an example. But if you are standing beside a lake or swimming pool is it self-evident—that is just by looking at it—that you cannot breathe underwater? When you walk into a church is it self-evident what you are supposed to do? Does the church sanctuary, arranged as it is, tell you what happens here? Do you not find that intuitive things so-called require some initial learning curve?

We have touched down in Mark’s gospel at a point in the story where Jesus is passing through Galilee with his disciples in such a way as not to be noticed. They are avoiding going into towns and villages where Jesus will be recognized; keeping to the less travelled routes, staying to the countryside. Why? Listen again to what Mark tells us; “They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He (Jesus) did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples.” The clear implication is that Jesus is convinced that the disciples needed to be taught the meaning of the gospel.

Mark continues, that Jesus was saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ This is a one sentence summary of Jesus’ teaching them that the Messiah must suffer and give his life for the sins of the world. I point out to you that there is nothing self-evident in witnessing the crucifixion of Jesus that tells you that the event has anything to do with the sin of the world. If you were standing there that day, Jesus’ crucifixion looks like any other of the thousands of crucifixions perpetrated by Rome. The disciples needed to be taught. We need to be taught the

meaning of the good news that is Jesus Christ. I invite you to reflect with me on our Lord's insistence that his followers need to be taught the gospel.

1. A few weeks ago I referenced the story of a writer named Paul Kingsnorth and his journey to Christian faith. He wrote, "The Cross holds the key to everything." Martin Luther said of Christian faith, "The cross is the test of everything." What was Jesus teaching his disciples about? In this one sentence summary that Mark gives us of the subject matter that our Lord is insisting his disciples learn we are given the outline of the heart of his teaching. We are given the essence that shapes the contours of all that our Lord taught. 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' This is what we mean theologically when we say, "the cross."

Three times in Mark's gospel we are given a summary paragraph like this one of how Jesus was teaching his disciples about his pending suffering; we call his suffering his passion. Today we read the second instance and the picture Mark paints is that this teaching has become the mainstay of our Lord's teaching of his disciples. In the outline of the story of Jesus we are now heading towards Jerusalem and Jesus is teaching them what will happen there and presumably why this must happen.

This comes as an incomprehensible shock to these disciples. "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." On lots of other occasions they were quite willing to ask Jesus for clarification of something he taught. But not here. Is it possible they were afraid to ask because they did not want to hear the answer. When Jesus used the term "Son of Man" the disciples know he means Messiah. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands," said Jesus. As far as the disciples were concerned the Son of Man was to triumph over humans and the empires of this world. The Messiah's triumph over Rome was the cultural vision in which the disciples swam. Jesus is endeavouring to educate his followers that indeed the Son of Man is to suffer.

Think of the cultural ideas of human flourishing in which we swim. Expressive individualism dominates and the ideal is to be whoever you believe yourself to be. At the same time, the currencies of merit and money are understood to be the avenues to achievement of the very best you. And people are crushed by these expectations. As believers we need to be educated about the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the perfect human life for us and gave his life to free us from all the tyrannies of personal achievement; frees us to live for him and in that discover who we were created to be. There is nothing wrong in being the best you can be—the gospel motivation is to be our best for him, for our Lord's sake. The cross is the test for everything.

We are told that the disciples, at this moment in their journey with Jesus, did not understand and were afraid to ask. What is clear is that by the time of the writing of Mark's gospel they did understand and had lost their fear about asking. Mark's gospel is considered to be a distillation of the preaching of the Apostle Peter. If so, the cross looms large in Peter's preaching as it does in Mark's gospel.

Permit me a little Bible history. Mark's gospel, considered to be the first of the four written gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), was written in the mid sixties of the first century; a little

over thirty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. When theologians speak of the passion narratives they refer to the material in these four gospels that begins with the last supper through to his burial which is part of the material we have of the last week of Jesus' life. (We read the passion narrative every Good Friday). Fleming Rutledge in her book *The Crucifixion* writes, it is "observed that the four Evangelists (gospel writers) tell the story of Jesus' life in four quite different ways. The four passion narratives vary greatly in details and in theological emphasis. Where all the Evangelists agree, however, is in the massive attention they give to the passion narrative and the way they aimed their Gospels toward the cross as the climax to the story of Jesus."

Rutledge further points out that "the New Testament witnesses had to fight with all their strength to keep the Lord's death at the forefront of the preaching, worship, and ethics of the new faith. Forces within and without the early church exploited every opportunity to minimize or set aside the absurdly irreligious claim that a degrading, state-sponsored execution had secured the salvation of the entire cosmos. But all four Evangelists resisted these pressures to move in the direction of something more spiritually familiar, and instead made the long, continuous passion narrative the climax of their work."

My point to you is that though they did not understand Jesus at this moment, their experience of Jesus crucified and risen from the dead was stamped so indelibly in their being they could do nothing except keep the cross of Christ central to their preaching. The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance. As then so now, there are many forces within and without the church that seek to minimize or set aside what the Apostle Paul calls the scandal of the cross. What would our Lord teach us about? The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

2. Whenever I come upon these gospel statements of our Lord's foretelling of his death and resurrection, I realize that this was no armchair theological discussion for him. Think about Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, "let this cup pass from me," as he contemplates the looming cross. The picture that sometimes comes to mind is the one we have seen of Jesus kneeling piously beside a rock in a serene moment with a shaft of light from heaven lighting up his face. The gospels do not paint so pretty a picture. The words they use describe a person agitated and beside himself, staggering and throwing himself to the ground in agony.

When Jesus said, "the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands", he is drawing on a Biblical image the disciples are familiar with from a vision of the prophet Daniel. When the disciples hear "Son of Man" it calls to mind the section of vision that describes how the Son of Man is given dominion over everything. But Jesus reads a little further where interpretation of the vision is given and how the holy ones of God are "given into" the power of a fourth beast for a period of time. In our translations the word "betrayed" is literally to be "given into". Jesus reads himself in these Biblical text—he is the one to be "given into human hands."

Consider how Jesus would read the text we read from Jeremiah today that speaks of Jeremiah's experience of shabby treatment because he is a prophet of God. "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter." When I reflect that it was my sin, my rebellion against God, that Jesus will

bear and bear away at the cross his love for me is simply staggering, beyond comprehension, and at the same time compelling, the truth I can surrender my life to. When I think that Jesus gave himself into our hands and we killed him; that he did so all for the sake of being completely for us, how can I be anything except all for him.

3. According to Jesus, we believers need to be taught the gospel; taught that the cross of Jesus Christ informs everything about this good news. It holds us in the midst of the ever shifting currents of our culture. It is the solid rock for footing in life. The Apostle Paul said “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Luther said that to nurture faith we need to shut our eyes and open our ears. When we look upon world occurrence we see much that contradicts the gospel claim of God’s love for us. The good news is heard and fosters faith upon hearing. Observing Jesus crucified looks to us as a contradiction of the news of God’s love; what we need is to hear what our Lord said about this event, it is what you hear through the writings of the Apostles. We become believers through hearing the gospel and we are sustained in our faith as we continue to hear the gospel announced. One of our church family, after a recent service, said “I needed to hear that today.” We all stand in this place of needing to hear announced afresh the good news of Christ giving his life for us.

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