

Year B Lent 2 2024 Saving the Soul of the Church Mark 8 vv31 to 38

Our lives are on the line. A dramatic statement but it is precisely Mark's point. Our lives are on the line.

The story begins with, seemingly, only Jesus' life on the line but, it very quickly becomes clear, that our lives are tied to his.

Peter has just tumbled into the realization that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and is, in fact, the Son of God. Immediately after this, Jesus tells him, and everyone else within earshot, that he – Jesus – must suffer, be rejected by the Jewish authorities, be killed, and then on the third day rise again to new life. Why would he make a point of telling everyone about his impending death right on the heels of the amazing insight that he is the Messiah? That's what the rest of the story is about but, first, let's take a look at the interaction between Jesus and Peter.

This is a heated exchange. Peter hears Jesus' dire prediction of his future and takes him aside to rebuke him. This is no "nicey-nice" "you mustn't talk like that, Jesus." Peter basically tells Jesus, quite forcefully, to "shut up!" (the Greek verb is *epitiman*). But, before Peter can go any further, Jesus lashes out at him and says, "No, you shut up!" (*epitemesen*). And Jesus does not keep the conversation private. He looks toward his disciples, making sure they can hear what he has to say to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" It sounds harsh but here comes the reason why our lives are on the line: "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter and the rest of the disciples may feel far removed from us in time but they certainly are not far removed in their thinking. Peter has realized he is hanging out with the Messiah. He is in the inner circle. And it's gone to his head. Peter has claimed for himself an authority that is not his to wield and is, in fact, according to Jesus, devilish. Peter has fallen prey to a very human pitfall: People feel more important when they hang around someone important. We see it in the schoolground phenomena of wanting to be a part of the "in" crowd. There are many young people who go to great lengths to win the coveted prize label of being a friend of the most popular boy or girl in their grade or school. It certainly does not end on the schoolground but carries on, for many, throughout adulthood. Highschool popularity morphs into boardroom power and power is alluring. People are trained to desire what the world tells them to desire: power based on property, position, and pocketbook. The problem is that when people aim their desires at these things, we will never achieve true peace, will never achieve equality, will never have a world in which all people have enough. In short, we will never achieve the fullness of God's kingdom.

Jesus knows he needs to shut down this worldly thinking – this desire for a way of life contrary to life in God's kingdom. He needs to clearly and forcefully show Peter and the disciples and us, that this thinking is broken and will always lead to more and greater brokenness. He must show them the way to real and lasting joy, the way to wholeness and healing.

He cares deeply and passionately about the well-being of humanity and so, as he continues to explain why it is so important to let go of this broken desire for the values of the world, he raises his voice and lifts his eyes to take in everyone

around: “If any of you,” he calls out, “If any of you want to follow me, you must take up your cross to follow me.” Take up your cross. What does that mean? We’ve talked about this before, of course, but it is a pivotal piece in our faith so let’s make things clear. Take up your cross is active. The Christian faith is lived out in a life of activity – and not just any old activity, the activities of the cross: speaking out against injustice, inequality, corruption and greed *and* living a life that does not include or enable those things. Take up your cross is relational – the Christian faith is relational. It is absolutely not just a between me and God thing. Bishop Robert Schnase, in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, devotes numerous pages to driving home this point. “Growth in faith,” he writes, “does not come easily or automatically, but *requires* placing ourselves in community to learn the faith with others...We learn the life of Christ and will of God by studying God’s Word and through experience with other people of faith...God uses faith-to-faith relationships to change us” (p.65). Without others, we engage in the typically human tendency to take in only what agrees with our current attitudes, behaviours, and way of life. “We give and receive the care of Christ,” Schnase continues, “by praying for one another, supporting one another through periods of grief and difficulty, and celebrating one another’s joys and hopes...The sanctifying grace of God bears the human face of our fellow disciples” (p.66). Take up your cross, says Jesus. Learn the faith and live the faith in community.

Why is this important? Jesus goes on to explain that this is the only way to save your life. The word he uses for life is the Greek word, *psyche*, which means your soul. Jesus is not talking here about your physical life – whether you live or die right now – but rather, the life of your soul, your very being. Your eternal life is at

stake. Taking up your cross is Jesus' way of telling us we must put our money where our mouth is, talk the talk and walk the walk – embracing now the love of God and neighbour that leads to radical care and compassion of all others, abundant generosity and sharing beyond our fear of not having enough for ourselves. Taking up our cross then also means we must let go our desire for the things that the world values, the things that can never bring wholeness to broken lives, to a broken world.

If you cling to those things that the world values – position, property, and pocketbook – you will lose your soul, Jesus warns. But, he says, if you can fight the norms, lose their grip, and live according to God's love and God's justice then you will save your soul, you will have life – now and in the future – in God's kingdom as it is revealed in all its fullness. You can have all the worldly power and wealth possible and it will mean nothing in the end, Jesus points out. Psalm 49 tells us, “Though in their lifetime they count themselves happy —for you are praised when you do well for yourself—” (v.18) death will be their shepherd as they descend to the grave forever and their form wastes away (v.14). There is nothing worth more than our eternal life, “no thing” we could ever give to God in exchange for eternal life.

Although this talk about saving our souls and having eternal life in God's kingdom sounds very individualistic, it is not and cannot be. God's kingdom is full of other people. If we are not in right relationship with others then we are not living in God's kingdom. God's very being is relational. God exists in community and so do we. We are the body of Christ – the Church – together. Many parts of the world-wide Church find themselves in a position where they operate more according to

the ways of the world rather than God's ways. We oftentimes run like a business organization more than a creation of the Spirit. We cling to values of the world and, as Jesus so bluntly tells us today, that is the surefire way of losing our life, the soul of the Church. If the words "successful church" have us fondly remembering or longing for full pews, overflowing coffers, and Sunday Schools bursting at the seams then we are clinging to a life valued by the world. Take up your cross is what the Church must do to survive. Taking up our cross as the Church means learning the faith and living the faith together. In seeking first the kingdom, the rest that we need will be given to us.

Jesus will come again, he assures us, in the glory of the Father and with the holy angels. What will it profit us to gain the world and lose our life when he comes? Through Lent and beyond, let's learn our faith and live our faith. Let's take up our cross together and save our soul.