

Second Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text – Mark 8:27-38

Theme: “*Calling the Messiah calls us to discipleship*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

St Peter remains my favourite apostle. Not because he was especially holy, in fact he often seemed to be very fallible. No, Peter has always appealed to me because he seems to have such a ‘ready for action’ attitude. Unfortunately Peter also seemed to be very quick to get himself in too deep which meant time and again he needed rescue from himself.

In today’s gospel reading Peter once more swings quickly from being the hero to only a few verses later being the villain who is doing the work of Satan. Peter is my favourite apostle because through his great weakness we see and come to know Jesus’ greater forgiveness.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Simply calling Jesus Christ is not enough

The context of today’s sermon helps us to better understand the importance of Mark’s gospel message. We are in the early stages of the season of Lent and last week we heard about Jesus’ temptation and his perfect resistance to everything Satan threw at him. Whereas Adam and Eve gave in to the first temptation levelled at them, Jesus withstood *all* temptations of the devil. His resistance reveals the ugly truth that all of the devil’s temptations are false and hollow, leaving those who succumb feeling cheated and gutted.

With this backdrop we can consider Jesus’ question to his disciples as they are travelling to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, “Who do people say that I am?” At first the disciples answer a little vaguely, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah”. Then Jesus asks them directly, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Jesus puts his closest followers to the test and of course it is Peter who leaps in with the answer. “You are the Christ.” And as Jesus has done so many other times he tells them not to tell any one else.

Doesn’t this fly in the face of what seems to be common sense? If you were Jesus, wouldn’t you want your followers telling *everyone* that you are the Messiah, the Christ, the chosen one of God who would lead his people to freedom? But of course Jesus’ concern is that people will look for an earthly messiah who will lead the Israelites to rise up and shake off the yoke of Roman rule. And whilst this might provide a measure of bloody freedom for that generation, Jesus was to be *the* Messiah whose blood would free *all* generations.

The earthly desire for a political or military leader is familiar to us. It enables us to live under the protection won by others without the need for sacrifice. If Jesus were to be an earthly ruler, there would be no need for him to go to the cross. Nor would there be any need for Peter or any of his other followers to give up their lives confessing faith in him alone. If Jesus lead the Israelites to a victory over the Romans, the situation for God’s people would be little better than if they were still under the pagan notion that Caesar was Lord.

What about our confession of who Jesus is? How is our faith reflected in our understanding of what the church teaches or how we practice our faith, in our daily lives, whether this is in worship or at any other time? The temptation is to just rattle off the words we know, paying lip service to the teaching of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or the blessed forgiveness that comes through God alone. If this is what religion meant, it would involve no need for Jesus’ sacrifice, nor would there be any need for us to sacrifice our sinful desires to follow Christ. If this were the case, our situation would be little better than the unbelievers who use God’s name as a punch line to a joke or who take his name in vain.

Calling Jesus the Christ, meant him going to the cross for us

Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ”, sounded good. The problem is what sort of Christ was Peter expecting? Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must suffer many things. He must be rejected by all the people who would normally have granted authority to an earthly Jewish ruler; the elders, the chief

priests and the experts in Jewish law. And the ultimate in earthly failure, he would have to die before being raised after three days. I wonder at what point in time Peter and the other disciples would have switched off from what Jesus was trying to tell them? Here was their friend and leader who was trying to explain that all of the adulation of the crowds was to be ignored and that he would suffer rejection before dying. None of this would have made any sense to them.

On many occasions Jesus spoke in parables to share something of the heavenly truth so that human ears could understand the depth and richness of God's blessings that he has given to us. On this occasion, Mark records that he spoke plainly. There was no hidden message in the idea that Jesus would be rejected before dying. This was God's plan of salvation being worked out, not for a generation, but for *all* humanity. But in spite of Jesus' plain words, Peter thought he knew best.

And so Peter took Jesus to one side. Peter obviously thought he knew better than God and so he sought to rebuke Jesus. Isn't that what we so often try to do today. We think we know better than God as to how to fix things up, and so we'll give him lots of helpful advice. Or we'll try to argue against God when things don't seem to be going the way we want them to.

Surely the temptation was once more strong for Jesus to turn his back on his fateful journey to the cross. Here was his closest supporter urging him to another way. Peter had taken him off to one side, so surely there would be no shame in coming up with another plan. But Jesus turned back towards his heavenly Father's path, saw his disciples and began to rebuke Peter in those shocking words, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Jesus wasn't suggesting that Peter was Satan, but rather that Peter had taken his eyes off Jesus and was being seduced to Satan's way of earthly glory which apart from God will always be empty. This remains true for us today. Whenever we take our eyes off Jesus, whenever we look for the quick and easy solution that is apart from God's will, we are succumbing to the temptation of Satan to spread his message rather than God's gospel.

Calling Jesus the Christ, calls us to follow him

When we confess Jesus as Lord, it has consequences for us. It means you *will be moved* by God's Word to shift from what you think may be right to being sure that God's plan *is* right. You will be shifted from believing in your 'best intentions', to trusting in Jesus salvation which has been won for all people on the cross. You will be moved from thinking about your plans for how you want things to work out for you in the short term. You will be moved to faith in God's Word alone, in spite of whatever circumstances you may find yourself in.

Living out true Christian faith isn't easy. It would be much easier if it was simply reciting some 'pat' phrases or clichés that roll easily off the tongue. It would be easy if it meant there wouldn't be any changes to the life of comfort and certainty that we build up around us. But it's not that easy. It involves sacrifice. It involves our sacrifice, not to make us right with God, but to give up the sinfulness which binds us to this world. It means turning our back to the temptations of Satan which are ultimately hollow, empty promises which leave us feeling gutted and empty. Living out the Christian faith means trusting in Jesus' sacrificing his perfect obedience for our sinfulness, dying in our place.

Peter was quick to call Jesus the Christ, the messiah. Jesus was never the earthly messiah looked for so long. This meant Peter and the disciples had to turn their backs on the earthly victory looked for and they were called to follow Jesus as his true disciples. When you call Jesus the Christ. When you say his is your saviour, you are called to follow him, to turn your back to Satan and to trust in his plan for you and for all people.

Amen.