

## MARK SERMON SERIES – WEEK FOUR

Readings: Mark 8: 27-33; Mark 9: 2-10; Mark 9: 30-37

May I speak now in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So here we are, once again, looking at the gospel of Mark. How are we getting on with this sermon series so far? You might be feeling like you have had enough of Mark and don't want to hear anything more from him for a while...in which case, I'm sorry, but we've still got four sermons to go. Or perhaps you are really enjoying getting to grips with this gospel, as I am as I prepare for and preach each week. You might wish the series could go on...in which case, I'm sorry, there are only four sermons left. Or, perhaps, you're not really bothered too much either way, as long as the preacher doesn't drone on too much...in which case, I'm sorry, you've got me today for this fourth sermon and it won't be quick, but then I normally never am at parish communion, am I? If it's any consolation it won't be more than four hours (just checking you were still awake!) and then I'll be finished. So, by way of a quick memory test for those who were here three weeks ago, what did our first sermon focus on? (*The beginning of the gospel; the emergence of John the Baptist; Jesus' baptism and temptation; followed by his calling of his first disciples (or followers) and his healing of a man with an evil spirit*). What about the second sermon? (*Jesus' response to the Sabbath including healing the man with a withered hand; and Jesus' stilling of the storm in a boat on Lake Galilee*). And last week? (*Jesus' healing of a woman with a haemorrhage; his sending out of his disciples; Jesus' challenging of some of the Jewish leaders and their rituals*). Today we are going to look briefly at some of the events in chapters eight and nine, namely Peter's declaration about Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, the Transfiguration and a discussion about greatness.

So to our first reading from Mark chapter eight. This chapter represents a pivotal point in the gospel, for although at the very beginning of his book, Mark has stated that it is about the good news of Jesus Christ, it is only at this halfway point that the question of who Jesus really is gets explicitly stated. And hence Jesus asks two similar questions. To the disciples he asks, "Who do people say that I am?" and to Peter he asks, "Who do you say that I am?". The disciples note that people have understood Jesus in various different ways – as John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. All good attempts to understand Jesus but all missing the crucial point made by Peter that he is in fact the Messiah, the Christ, the promised saviour from God. And yet his answer would have shocked many people for Jesus then goes on to say that he must undergo great suffering, be killed and three days later rise from the dead. This was not the kind of Messiah that many Jews were expecting, rather a Messiah who would triumphantly conquer the Romans and establish God's kingdom in Israel. But they were forgetting that the Old Testament prophets foresaw not only a triumphant Messiah but also a suffering Messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah chapter fifty three, 'The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities'. Perhaps this is why Jesus strictly orders his disciples not to tell anyone who he really is, since the people's idea of Messiah ship was the wrong one, and he didn't want the wrong idea to be spread to others. Peter, of course, was one of those Jews who failed to understand what Jesus as the Messiah really meant and hence he rebuked Jesus for talking of his suffering and death. However, in a reference back to the earlier temptation narrative, Jesus rebukes him sharply with the words, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Strong words indeed.

Our second reading moves us on to Mark chapter nine, and the account of the Transfiguration which most commentators believe now happened at Mount Hermon rather than Mount Tabor which has traditionally been identified with this story. The story has been interpreted by scholars in three different ways. Firstly, as a symbolic piece of writing to affirm the Messiah ship of Christ. Secondly, as the historical experience of a visionary character. Thirdly, as a mis-placed resurrection story, however most scholars now view it in the second way. It is interesting here that Jesus chooses those disciples closest to him – Peter, James and John – as the ones who will get the closest insight into his character and identity as the beloved Son of God, a reference back to his earlier baptism of course. And it is also revealing that Mark records Elijah and Moses as talking with Jesus for they represent the law and the prophets, who spoke of the suffering servant of God, and so their very presence affirms Jesus as the Messiah. The use of the cloud imagery by Mark is also interesting here. The cloud was a symbol of the divine presence in the Exodus account leading the people of Israel in their daytime wanderings, and also a symbol of God’s presence at the dedication of the first temple. However, it was also expected to reappear in Messianic times too, being connected in the New Testament with not only the Transfiguration but also the Ascension and the return of Christ as well. And again, after these events have occurred, Jesus once again forbids the disciples from telling others what they have seen until after he has risen from the dead. Perhaps the thought of this glorious Son of God as the suffering one would have been too much for them to comprehend.

Then, in our third reading, we see evidence of the earlier pivotal chapter in the gospel being fleshed out. For having acknowledged Jesus’ identity as the Suffering Messiah, Jesus now turns towards Jerusalem and his impending passion, beginning to make his way through Galilee and Capernaum. And again he tells his disciples of the suffering and death which lies ahead of him as the Son of Man, a reference to the fact of Jesus’ humanity as well as his divinity that is acknowledged at the Transfiguration. The reference to being betrayed here (or ‘delivered up’ to use another translation) may be a reference to Judas but it is more likely to be a reference to being delivered up as part of God’s desires. Unsurprisingly, the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying and they are also too afraid to ask him – perhaps they do not want to understand the true nature of this Messiah. The dispute about greatness is an interesting one and may have perhaps followed on from the privilege accorded to Peter, James and John to witness the transfiguration. But Jesus turns it on its head, doesn’t he, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” True greatness comes from putting others first ahead of ourselves, as in using the mnemonic JOY that you may have learnt at Sunday School like me. Joy comes from putting Jesus first, others second and yourself last. That does not mean that we should not love ourselves though, even if we seek to put the needs of others before ourselves. We are called to live sacrificially in serving others as well as welcoming them, arguably two of the great ministries of the church.

So how might these readings relate to us then here in Lower Caversham? I wish to give us three things to think about. Firstly, who is Jesus for you? If he were to say to you, as he said to Peter, ‘Who do you say that I am?’, how would you respond? Would you acknowledge him as the Messiah, the suffering servant of God who is also your Saviour? As I said two weeks ago here, we can think of Jesus (according to C.S. Lewis) as ‘mad, bad or God’. Who is He for you? Secondly, what are you setting your mind on – human things or divine things? I’m sure we are all familiar with the phrase, ‘They’re so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use’, but I wonder if that’s really true of you, or me? Are we more practically, as opposed to spiritually minded, perhaps? If only we were more spiritually tuned into what God wants and then doing His will, we would be so much more effective I

think as opposed to us often deciding what God wants and then asking him to bless it. We need to learn to wait upon God for his guidance and then go with the flow of His Spirit, setting our minds on things above. Thirdly, if true greatness is to be found in our service and welcome of others, how are we expressing that in our lives as Christians and as members of this church? Have we welcomed the recent newcomers to St. John's? How are we serving God in this place, and outside of it? There is a list of three things we need help with at present on the notice sheet. Could you help with one or more of those tasks?

To conclude, as we have reached the halfway, pivotal point in our series on Mark's gospel today, let's remember that Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God and Son of Man, is the one who keeps on calling each one of us to respond to his love. To set our minds not on human things, like greatness, but on spiritual things, like serving and welcoming others. And, as ever, do take away your notice sheet with some questions to think about for this coming week, whether on your own or with others in your small group, for example.

Let us pray...

God, help us to walk in Jesus' shoes and experience the world through his eyes as we approach the time of his trial and death in our series from Mark. Amen.