



24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Rev Linda Murphy

Year B, Ordinary 24

Mark 8:27-38

15 September 2024

You couldn't describe Mark as a great publicist or PR person for Jesus and his message, after reading today's Gospel, could you!

Great suffering and rejection followed by death on the cross!

Most of Jesus' ministry was in the Jewish areas of Galilee and Judea. However, in the middle of Mark we find Jesus and his disciples near Caesarea Philippi, a very Roman setting and once the limit of ancient Israel's northward extension. This was a capital built by Phillip to honour the Roman emperor who had given him this area to rule. It was famous for a temple to the pagan God Pan, the worship of Baal, the cult of emperor worship. The irony of Mark's gospel begins in a city built to celebrate worldly power.

The stories leading up to this episode repeatedly emphasize the disciples' ignorance and hardness of heart. For the reader however, Jesus' identity in the Gospel of Mark is never in doubt. The opening verse tells us he is the Messiah and Son of God. We are privy to voices from heaven and declarations from demons, both of which declare Jesus true identity as Messiah and Son of God. This rift between reader's knowledge and that of the characters (particularly the disciples) is a significant narrative technique of Mark. It helps to create irony and build tension.

Up until chapter 8 that tension has been implicit. In this episode of Caesarea Philippi, it becomes explicit in Jesus' questions directly to the disciples. First, 'who do people say that I am?' and then "who do you say that I am?" It introduces the idea that a prophetic ministry such as John the Baptist's or Jesus will probably end with suffering and death. As it turns out, this is exactly the direction of the narrative in chapter 8.

Jesus accepts the Hebrew designation of Messiah, the chosen and anointed one who fulfils the promise to David that God will establish David's throne forever. Here Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, the exalted figure from Daniel 7 who will come on the clouds of heaven to be given dominion overall.

Jesus's question "Who do people think I am?" Elicits a number of answers all of them associating Jesus with the tradition of prophets whom God has appointed as speakers for his message to Israel.

"But who do you say I am?" Peter answers with the right answer but its not very logical. The title "Messiah" in Hebrew or "Christ" in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory.

Nothing in Jesus's ministry to date has given any indication of claims to royalty or political ambitions. So far Jesus has made no claim to be the Messiah, and he certainly has shown no sign of taking on the Romans. Perhaps that is why Jesus tells his disciples to tell no one about him.

Josephus the historian mentions a dozen or more "messiah" figures being around Israel at this time. It therefore wasn't unusual to have claimants to Messiahship.

He then tells the disciples in stark, graphic detail what it means for him to be the Messiah. He will undergo suffering, rejection, and death, before he is finally vindicated by resurrection after three days.

The rebuke from Peter to Jesus and then Jesus's stern reply, is crucial to understand that Jesus is correcting some mistaken ideas the disciples have about Messiahship. Jesus insists on identifying with the ostracized, unclean, and or marginalized. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer by the Jewish religious leaders. He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans.

That is not all, Jesus expects his disciples to follow him on this path of suffering and death. Jesus is talking about putting his priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others- using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love made known to us through Jesus.

Jesus asks what good is it to gain the whole world but to forfeit our souls. What a challenge to the materialism, which hardens our hearts against God and our fellow creatures. Environmental and climate activism requires sacrifices, we are called to sacrificial living to live more simply. We will sacrifice our time, our resources, our energy. There may be times when we feel that we are burning out because challenges are so great and yet we are called to act with hope. It is action that brings hope, and it is hope that inspires action.

Before Homeground opened we planned and dreamt of what our community would be like and the needs to support this new community, our neighbours. We employed Sam Morrison as our Community Development Lead and he dreamed of a community with a garden that provided food and beauty and he achieved this

and in 2023 was included in the NZ Gardener of the Year competition. Sadly, Sam passed away early in 2024 but his legacy has continued. I visit the level 9 garden regularly and it continues to give joy and nourishment. The Homeground Community continues Sam's dream. Sam's dream and hope and that of the Homeground Community is one our hope in the spirit of renewal and recreation.

Mark announces from the beginning that this story is Good News. We need to read the whole story. Mark tells us that Jesus was faithful unto death, even while all around him proved faithless, and that God raised him to new life. Because of this, we know that God's life-giving power is far stronger than the worst that human hands can do. Because of this, we know that there is no sin or failure so great that it can finally separate us from the love of God.