

Sermon
Mark 8:31-38

The Way to Life
St John's URC

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Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life. Jesus said all this plainly. Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to tell him off for being so negative and melodramatic. And then Jesus said, "Peter, you are right; what was I thinking? Why should I suffer and be put to death? I'm not going to attract many followers that way, am I? Let's forget all this 'doing what God wants' business and instead let's do what we want." Then he called the crowd and the disciples to him and announced: "Friends, Peter has convinced me that all this death and self-denial stuff is negative, melodramatic, and will not be popular with the punters. Instead let's adopt some more attractive slogans such as: 'If it feels good, do it'; 'Greed is good'; and 'You can have the life you want.'" The crowd and the disciples responded, "That's a relief! It's so much easier when you leave out those awkward demands from God."

I hope this tongue-in-cheek version of the Gospel reading highlights the difference between what Jesus could have taught in order to be popular and what Jesus actually taught. The tongue-in-cheek version deliberately uses some of the more extreme statements affirming 'human wants'. Very few people would actually subscribe to: 'If it feels good, do it'; 'Greed is good'; and 'You can have the life you want' as philosophies of life, since most people recognise that life doesn't work like this. Yet there are less extreme and subtler forms of these slogans that remain popular and pervasive, such as, 'You

deserve it'; 'Enjoy yourself'; and 'You can change your life.' What is common to all these slogans is that the *human self is central*. The human self is the Sun in this solar system and everything else orbits round it. According to this way of thinking, one has to preserve oneself and protect one's life at all costs. It seemed that Peter was thinking along these lines when he heard Jesus predict his suffering and death. Peter believed that for Jesus to suffer and die would be a disaster; he could see no good coming from it. This is why he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for talking like this. But it was this very kind of thinking that earned Peter a stinging rebuke from Jesus. Indeed, one could scarcely imagine a worse way to be rebuked:

Get behind me, Satan! These are not the thoughts of God but the thoughts of humans. (v. 33)

Poor Peter! Just prior to this, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he really was. Peter replied, "You are the Messiah". Jesus then told Peter and the other disciples not to tell anyone else about him (8:29-30.) The implication, one that Matthew brings out in his version of the same encounter (Mt. 16:16-17), is that Peter has rightly discerned who Jesus really is, God's Messiah, the one Anointed by God to liberate his people (see Ps. 110). But the people are not yet ready to accept this revelation, so the disciples are to keep quiet about it. Then Jesus drops the bombshell that he believes it is God's will that he should suffer, die, and rise from the dead. On hearing this, Peter cannot accept that God's Messiah, the Anointed One, should suffer and die. Hence he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, and then earns the harshest of rebukes from Jesus. Poor Peter: he goes from 'hero to zero' in a matter of minutes! Jesus is definitely not 'meek and mild' on

this matter, and we might ask: why? Why should Jesus be so harsh in his rebuke of Peter?

The rebuke 'Get behind me, Satan' is reminiscent of Jesus's rejection of the Devil when tempted in the wilderness. The third and last of the Devil's temptation was the promise to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if he would bow down and worship the Devil. But Jesus's reply is: "Go away, Satan! Scripture says, 'You shall bow down to the Lord your God and worship him alone'" (Mt. 4:10). In a similar way, Jesus rebukes Peter as a 'Satan'—that is, as an Adversary diametrically opposed to the purpose of God—because Peter's rejection of Jesus's announced path of suffering represents for Jesus as real a temptation as any experienced in the wilderness.

We must not forget that Jesus is truly human and therefore is subject to the fear of death and to temptation like any other human being. It is a natural human reaction to avoid the prospect of suffering and death. Peter communicates this natural human reaction on behalf of, and out of concern for, Jesus. However, Jesus recognises that Peter's natural human reaction is being used by the malevolent power of Satan to try to deflect Jesus from doing God's will. Hence Jesus's strident denunciation is directed primarily to the Power opposed to God and only secondarily to Peter. One can imagine that when Jesus says 'Get behind me, Satan' he looks not directly at Peter but over Peter's shoulder to the malevolent Power he believes is influencing him at that moment. And when Jesus follows this by saying, "These are not the thoughts of God but the thoughts of humans" he is pointing out how easily natural human motivations can be exploited and commandeered to oppose the purpose of God.

Jesus recognises in Peter's very human concern for Jesus's welfare a distraction and deflection from God's purpose and a temptation inadvertently to connive with Satan's purposes. Having exposed this temptation, Jesus uses the opportunity to make a wider point.

The exchange thus far has been between Jesus and the disciples, but now Jesus calls a crowd of people along with the disciples to teach them one of central truths of discipleship.

Anyone who wants to be my follower must disown self, take up one's cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save one's own life will lose it; but whoever loses one's own life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world at the cost of one's soul?
(vv. 34-36)

One of the central paradoxes of the Christian Faith is the claim that we come to experience true life only through first identifying ourselves with Christ's death. Jesus effectively says to his would-be followers, 'Loosen your vice-like grip on yourself and on life, abandon yourself and begin to follow me, even to the cross, and then you will discover a life worth living. If you keep gripping onto life too hard you may gain the whole world but you risk losing your soul.' The Greek word for 'soul' is the same word used for 'life': *psychē* (*ψυχή*). Today we tend to employ the word *psychē* to refer to the mind, but as used by the writers of the New Testament *psychē* refers to the essence of a person, the personality, what makes persons who they are. The heart of the paradox is this: a life centered on yourself and your own concerns and interests is, according to Jesus, a spiritually dead life. By contrast, a life centered on Jesus involves dying to your self-centeredness and

coming alive to God and to your neighbour. This is an expansive life, a saved life, and a holistic life. In Mark's Gospel this life is called the 'Kingdom of God' and in the Fourth Gospel it is called 'eternal life'. This life centered on Jesus will not be lost even to physical death, since as Jesus was resurrected from death to eternal life so will those who have died be resurrected by God to eternal life. According to Mark, only a life orientated to Jesus and the gospel can lead to this.

Trying to 'have the life you want' is like gripping fine sand; no matter how hard you try to hold onto it, eventually it runs through your fingers. But if you will let yourself be held by God as Jesus let himself be held by God—trusting in God even through suffering and death—then you will find the way to life. If you will let yourself be held by God as Jesus let himself be held by God, then 'what *you* want' becomes less and less important. What becomes more and more important is doing what *God* wants and helping to make life better for *others* through living-out the gospel. Gradually, the demanding and needy self retreats into the background and the serving and confident self comes into the foreground.

When, through Jesus, we trust that we are held in God's hands, our own hands are liberated from their vice-like grip on life. Our hands become as open as Jesus's hands were. With open hands we can pray and praise, help and serve, give and receive. In a moment you will be invited to share the Lord's Supper. In order to receive the bread and the wine, effective symbols of the life of Jesus, you will need to let go of what you are holding onto. I encourage you to let that be a deeply symbolic and spiritual action: let go of self and receive Jesus Christ, the bread of life and cup of salvation.
Thanks be to God.