

Lent 2
Year B 2024
Mark 8:31-38

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life.

Amen.

Today's gospel finds Jesus and his disciples in the middle of a private conversation.

Jesus has just acknowledged that he is the Messiah, the anointed king through whom God will deliver God's people.

It's not hard to imagine that the disciples associate the title Messiah with earthly glory.

The disciples have already witnessed the fanfare as Jesus' travels the countryside.

The crowds clamoring to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

And they have witnessed poor and sick villagers receive Jesus' healing powers.

They've also witnessed Jesus' mastery in debating local and religious leaders in debate.

Clearly, given what we have heard so far in Mark's gospel, and what the disciples have witnessed, Jesus must be the Messiah.

Imagine their confusion, their distress when Jesus clearly states that he must endure rejection, suffering and death.

They must be thinking, "Wait, what?!?"

This doesn't make any sense.

When this passage is taken out of context, it seems to suggest that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to suffer and die.

Jesus continues and takes it even further by saying those who want to become his followers must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow.

The disciples have just been told that they are following Jesus to a cross.

To the disciples only the worst of the worst end up on a cross.

This surely cannot happen to the Messiah.

To the one they have been following who feeds, clothes, consoles, and heals.

In the words of one commentator:

Mark's Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that mission brings to established law and order. Unbeknownst to Jesus' opponents, they are opposing the in-breaking reign of the kingdom of God.

In Mark, Jesus is unflinching in his insistence that his divine mission is to alleviate human suffering.

Regardless of the stigma of associating with the outcast, the ill, the lowly.

The actions of Mark's Jesus also override any application of religious tradition that might hamper his divine mission to relieve suffering.

As we know, Jesus' actions lead to violent antagonism from those invested in maintaining the status quo.

In verse 34, Jesus summons the surrounding crowd, eyeing the possibility of still more disciples. His repeated use of relative pronouns ("anyone," verse 34; "whoever," verse 35; "whoever," verse 38), while somewhat muted in the NRSV, makes it clear that the cost of discipleship is not limited to an apostolic few. Anyone who purports to follow Jesus must understand the sacrifice involved. For Mark, discipleship is not some comfortable affiliation with Jesus but a life-changing—and potentially life-threatening—commitment to him.

So much of today's Christianity has been reduced to a comfortable affiliation with Jesus. Our tantrums against the specter of "relativism" hardly cloak the fact that there is little cost to our discipleship. Of course, some Christians are persecuted in certain parts of the world. Still, as preachers discern the relevance of this passage for today, they will do well to bear in mind that, for Mark at least, discipleship amounts to participation in Jesus' ministry. What makes the ministry of the Markan Jesus counter-cultural, and therefore the object of earthly hostility, is not that it is "Christian" per se but that it abides no impediment to the immediate restoration of the broken and outcast.

However, when read within its narrative context, we come to see that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to give life—knowing that earthly powers will violently oppose them.