

“THINKING GOD’S WAY (Mark 29)”

Mark 8:31-33

No doubt many of you here this morning heard or saw all or part of Tony Blair’s speech to the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth at the beginning of last week. Whatever you may think of his policies and his principles, there is no doubting that he is a great communicator and that was reflected in the long ovation which he received at the end of the speech (although Jon Pienaar did observe that Gordon Brown looked as if he was carefully cupping a very sick hamster rather than applauding enthusiastically).

In his speech, Mr Blair spoke with apparent honesty about the difficulties of leadership and of government. It was clearly not an easy road and he has had a good deal of opposition from inside and outside his party over recent months. But, he emphasised, with a determination and a vocabulary that were eerily reminiscent of Mrs Thatcher at her most uncompromising, he was not intending to back down on any of his policies. The way ahead may well be difficult, but he has “*no reverse gear*”.

The words we’ve read this morning from Mark’s story of Jesus contain a similar statement from Jesus. (Please don’t infer from this any suggestion that Tony Blair might have messianic pretensions – or, rather, that his messianic pretensions have any basis in reality!) You will recall, I hope, that immediately before this we have had the revelation that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the anointed and chosen messenger of God, the Christ. After a period of ministry in which we have seen Jesus speaking of and demonstrating by his actions that the Kingdom of God foretold by the Hebrew prophets is now actually being inaugurated, Jesus has questioned his close friends, the disciples, about the things being said about him (a kind of mini “consultation exercise”). They have been watching him as he has healed the sick, welcomed the outcasts, debated with the leaders of the religious establishment, confronted the forces of evil and shown his power over the forces of nature. He has given them a glimpse of what this new kingdom, this radical new way of looking at the world is like and has offered them the opportunity to be a part of it rather than relying on their own, outmoded and inadequate agenda for getting through this life and into the next.

As they have watched him and listened to him, the disciples have come to the conclusion that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, the one whom God has said will come and set things to right for his people. But, along with most of the other people who have seen Jesus, they have a view of the Messiah which is rather skewed in favour of a political and military leader, someone who will overthrow their oppressive Roman masters and usher in a new Jewish kingdom. Already some people have spoken of making him king and Jesus is anxious that they shouldn’t concentrate too much on that aspect of the messianic prophecies. So he firstly tells his disciples not to tell anyone else who he is (tacitly acknowledging that he is, in fact, the Messiah). And now he goes on to say a few words about what the implications of all this are for him and, as we shall see on another occasion, for those who want to follow him.

Again, he doesn’t use the word “*Messiah*” of himself here, but chooses another name taken from the prophecies of the Old Testament – “*the Son of Man*”. All sorts of stuff has been written about this title, including a recent book by Walter Wink, and all kinds of theories about how and why Jesus uses it have been put forward. In fact, only Jesus himself ever uses this title of himself and he uses it 81 times in the gospels. At the heart of all these theories, though, is the contention that Jesus has taken this title from words in the book of *Daniel* (*Daniel 7:13-14*), where the figure of the Son of Man is a glorious messianic one and, taken on its own, would support the idea of some powerful regal figure who would sweep away all that was not of God.

As becomes clear, though, reading through other prophecies and predictions in the Old Testament, there is much more to the Messiah than some kind of Terminator figure who will march triumphantly into and out of battle, oiled muscles gleaming in the glow of a thousand burning enemy chariots. And Jesus himself is clearly intending here to make perfectly plain what being the Messiah is all about and what

following that Messiah will entail for those who are serious about it. He actually now begins to “teach” his disciples – he sits down and runs through it step by step – what this Son of Man or Messiah figure is going to have to go through. And notice that he says “must” (v31). This is his destiny, He is now embarked on a journey to confront that destiny. It may not be apparent as we read through this book a few verses at a time, but from now on Jesus is travelling inexorably towards Jerusalem and his appointment with the cross at Golgotha. There is “no reverse gear” now.

Now, once again, we are at a bit of a disadvantage when reading these words today. We know the rest of the story already. We have heard how this Messiah ends up. And we do not have the same kind of expectations of the Messiah that Peter and his companions – nor, indeed, the very first readers of this book – might have had. So these words do not have the impact on us that they would have had on those who encountered Mark’s story when it first appeared. But try for a moment to imagine what it was like.

Here is Jesus, who has done such amazing things and who has now, albeit reluctantly, admitted that he is the Son of Man, the Messiah. Hope is dawning in the minds and hearts of his followers and the crowds who listen to him as he travels around. He is the Messiah. There’s going to be a fight and he’s going to win and everything will suddenly be alright after centuries of wars, exile, oppression, occupation. God is now going to vindicate his people and Israel is finally going to achieve its promised destiny. That cannot happen, if you look at it in any kind of rational and sensible way without the Messiah using his power and might to destroy the Romans and any other nasty Gentiles who might stand in the way. The Messiah is an invincible and majestic figure for whom failure is not an option in the eyes of these expectant and nationalistic followers.

But, alas! things are going to be quite a bit different. This Messiah will have to “suffer many things”. There’s going to be a price to pay for all this. Mark doesn’t tell us how explicit Jesus is in what he says to the disciples, but we know what the suffering was. At the very least, Jesus had to suffer the humiliation of leaving the glory and splendour of heaven to live in a human body here on earth. But part of his suffering was also to be “rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law.” We’ve come across these people several times already in the story so far. They are the ones who remain totally unimpressed by Jesus and his words and actions. They have taken every opportunity to test him, to question him and to condemn him as someone who is misleading the people. And in debate and discussion Jesus seems to have won each time.

But they are determined to get him. Way back in chapter 3, Mark told us that they were intending to kill Jesus. That in itself is a cause of rejection, of course, but for Jesus the pain must have seemed even greater because these are the very people who are supposed to be looking for the Messiah, who have all the learning and all the opportunities to identify the Messiah and acknowledge him as the one sent by God that the people have been waiting for for centuries. And they cannot see who Jesus is. Their minds have become closed to any new demonstrations of God’s love and power because they are locked into a system that gives them power over the people and allows them to set the rules. Jesus just doesn’t fit into their way of looking at things. Their agenda is fixed and they will brook no interference with it. How on earth is the Messiah going to accomplish his glorious victory if the representatives of the establishment which has been created to safeguard things until the Messiah does return cannot accept him?

And Jesus goes on to say that this suffering and rejection will lead to death. The invincible Messiah will be killed. But that is just not part of the thinking of Peter and the others. It cannot happen. But Jesus says it will – and what is even more incredible to them is that he will “rise again after three days.” It’s a lot to take in and all seems a bit strange to the disciples. But at least on this occasion, Mark tells us, “he spoke plainly about this.” Jesus is telling it to them as it is – no parables, no enigmatic sayings, no stuff that’s only “for those who have ears to hear”. This is the straight truth. And Peter doesn’t like it.

So Peter takes Jesus aside and has a quick word with him. He no doubt tells Jesus that he’s got it all wrong. If he thinks he’s the Messiah, then there are certain standards to be upheld, certain qualities that

he has to exhibit – and falling out with the priests, suffering in any way, and getting himself killed are definitely not part of the package. There is no place in Peter's scheme of things for a suffering Messiah. It wouldn't work. Now we all think Peter's wrong, I'm sure, but, as I've said, we know the story, we've got the rest of the New Testament and a couple of thousand years of scholarship to help us. And we're not first century Jewish fishermen who have been living under enemy occupation and have had instilled into us a deeply held and long-cherished belief about a glorious, triumphant, invincible Messiah. As far as Jesus is concerned, though, this is another temptation – like the ones he had during his forty days in the desert when he struggled with the Satan – to take a short cut, to try and achieve his goal without having to cope with any of the hassles.

So he turns on Peter and calls him Satan. Peter's view of the Messiah is limited, clouded by human concerns and based on human experience. *"You aren't looking at things God's way,"* he says. *"You're taking the human perspective again."* Peter cannot see the big picture. He cannot overcome his own ideas. He cannot countenance anyone doing things successfully other than by the way he would do it. But God has a different view of things, and that's the view we're encouraged to trust. We read about that in the words from *Isaiah 55* earlier on. God's ways are not our ways. God thinks not just outside the envelope, but outside the entire postal system. He has a cosmic imagination which we could never hope to develop ourselves. And, of course, God knows all the things we don't – all the other factors that would help us to make the right decision.

But that comes at a cost. There is no easy way to resolve all our problems, to overcome all our difficulties. There is no simple route to untangling the mess humanity has got itself into. Oh, yes, we can sing along with the vapid and vacuous words of John Lennon's *Imagine*, we can make our protests and hold our prayer vigils, we can try to brush it all under the carpet and just hope things get better in the end. But Jesus teaches us that God's purposes cannot be achieved without 100% commitment and that will include suffering. There is a price to pay – no, there is an investment to make. And we need to recognise that.

As Christians we must resist the temptation of triumphalism. Yes, we know that in the end Jesus will overcome all things – he's already made a start with sin and death. But we're not there yet. And sin and death were conquered only at the expense of the ultimate sacrifice. There is no kudos attached to being a follower of Jesus. If you're looking for success in worldly terms, being a Christian is not going to assure you of it. We claim to follow a suffering Messiah and, if that's the case, we need to recognise that suffering will be part of our lot as well. It's tough – as we shall find out when we look at the next few verses.

Jesus welcomes everyone into his Kingdom. No-one is excluded. But once you're in there are certain responsibilities and it is just beginning to dawn on Jesus' disciples that things might be a bit more serious than they first thought. The first lesson to learn – for them and for us – is that you have to learn to overcome the temptation to look at everything through human eyes, to try and resolve everything with the logic of human rationality. As one writer puts it (C E Graham Swift *NBCR*), *"The goal of true discipleship is complete conformity to the divine mind as revealed in Jesus."*

Now, we might say that we have to learn to see everything as God sees it, to think as God does. But that's impossible. Our human limitations are just too great. But what we do need to do is trust God that his way is right. It may seem to be totally at odds with what we'd expect, with what we'd do. His solutions are often nothing like the answers we'd give. But we are told by Jesus to *"have in mind the things of God"*, to believe that God will see us through. It's not easy – after all, we've been taught the way things should be, we've had drummed into us the way the world works. But if we want to get serious about Jesus, then we have to learn to trust him to lead us through the paths of sacrifice and suffering. It's a great adventure. Don't just paddle around the edges – get involved. It's a path of commitment that is always worth following – but it's also very scary. Are you up for it? Having looked at the implications for Jesus this morning, in a couple of weeks time, we'll look at the implications for us.

Questions for discussion

1. Describe some of the things Jesus had to suffer.
2. Why do you think it was so difficult for Peter and the disciples to grasp what Jesus was saying?
3. Why does Jesus call Peter Satan?
4. *“Jesus teaches us that God’s purposes cannot be achieved without 100% commitment and that will include suffering. There is a price to pay – no, there is an investment to make. And we need to recognise that.”* Why is it an investment to make, not a price to pay?
5. Can we learn to see things as God sees them? Why/why not? If not, what should we do?
6. Share any examples of “suffering” for Jesus from your own personal experience. How do you feel about them?
7. What one thing have you learned from this passage?