

“TAKING IT (VERY) SERIOUSLY (Mark 30)”

Mark 8:34 – 9:1

We come this morning to one of those passages Mark Twain must have thinking about when he said, *“It’s not the passages in the Bible that I don’t understand that worry me – it’s the passages I do understand.”* You may have noticed that we’ve slowed down a bit over the past few weeks – an unsuccessful attempt to put off the time when we had to deal with this passage. They’re not difficult things to understand – but they’re very difficult to take seriously in the sense that they demand a response. If you really do believe that what we have here is God’s word, that this is something that has been written with a purpose, then there are serious consequences and far-reaching implications of it all for us.

Up to this point as we’ve been reading through this account of Jesus’ life and ministry according to Mark’s version, we have seen that the people who were following Jesus around have had an opportunity to see something of the Kingdom of God in action. The Hebrew prophets had foretold a day when God’s rule would eventually run uncontested in the world, when creation would be restored to the state God originally intended, before sin and evil had distorted and perverted so much of it. Suddenly Jesus arrived – God in human shape, God with us, a way of seeing something of God in a form that was understandable to the limited human imagination – and he came proclaiming the “gospel”, the good tidings that those prophets had first pointed us towards. He was going to start the process of bringing to reality that kingdom of God.

And he did that in what he said – teaching the people directly and in stories. He demonstrated in the way he acted – showing that the old rules and regulations, which were by now a way of keeping people in thrall to the religious leaders, were not what it was all about. He showed it by healing people and confronting the forces of evil which ruined and demeaned them, giving them back their humanity and restoring a lost sense of community. He even showed that he was Lord of all creation by producing food more or less from nowhere and taming the destructive power of nature as it raged over the Sea of Galilee. Everything was nice and comfortable – the Kingdom of God was a happy place and anyone could be a part of it: Jews, Gentiles, holy men and miserable sinners.

But those who followed Jesus have, up to this point, had the Kingdom “on approval” – have a look at it and see if you like it. This is what it will all be about: healing, wholeness, *shalom*, a new perspective on this world, a new agenda for your lives. The old agenda of tradition, rules, self-preservation has had its day and new things are going to be happening. As we saw last time, though, the mood is beginning to change. Jesus, identified now as the Messiah, the Son of Man, is certainly going to make a difference, but not in the triumphant way expected of a political and military leader. He was going to have to suffer, to die. Now, if you are interested in this Kingdom, in the new agenda, the radical alternative to the way you’ve been told life should be lived – now, there’s a decision to make. The approval period is over and it’s time to make up your mind – will you buy into it, or reject it as something you don’t want? What a choice! So, if you’re interested in this, if you want to be a part of the Kingdom of God, if you want to get the very best out of life now and for ever more, it’s time to decide. And there seem to be four parts to this decision.

1. THE DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS

“If anyone would come after me ...” says Jesus. And, as we’ve seen, there were many people who came after Jesus, who followed him round, who chased him from one town to another looking for miracles, wanting his advice, eager to challenge his theology. I hadn’t noticed until I was reading this passage this week the words at the beginning of v34 – this is no longer a quiet chat with his inner core of friends, the disciples: Jesus is speaking to the crowds, those who were hanging around waiting for a bit of the action.

No doubt they had all kinds of reasons for being there – curiosity, need, boredom, real interest, critical motives even. But they were there. They knew something was going on and they wanted to see a bit more. And by the end of the day, some of them had decided that they didn't want any more of it.

And there are plenty of crowds like that today. People who show interest in Jesus – some of you here this morning perhaps – here out of curiosity, wanting to find out a bit more. Some of you are here because you can't think of anything else to do on a Sunday morning – it's what you've always done. Some of you don't really want to be here, but your spouse or a friend has brought you along. Some of you are here to see what you can get out of it all. There are all kinds of motives for following Jesus in that sense. And some of you may well have made up your mind, or slipped into the attitude, that you aren't too bothered about getting in any deeper.

2. THE DECISION TO DENY ONESELF

But Jesus says that those who really want to follow have got to decide where the priorities are going to lie. Those who want to get in deeper have got to “*deny themselves*”. Self-denial is part of the package. There used to be a Salvation Army campaign each year called “Self-Denial Week” – I don't know if it still exists. The point was that you denied yourself something – your chocolate, your magazines, your beer or whatever – for a week and gave the money to their work. This is not that kind of self-denial – denying yourself something. It's actually renouncing your self, giving up on the idea that you and you alone are the main focus of activity and interest in the little world you inhabit.

Now, as you'd expect by now from what we've read of Jesus in Mark's account, this is a radical reversal of normal human values. Usually our culture tells us to look after Number One, to ensure that we are catered for, that our own whims are indulged. Whether that's a conscious decision on our part, or whether it's an attitude that we imbibe subconsciously from the society of which we're a part, or whether it's something that is just built into us as a genetic predisposition, a mechanical reflex to ensure the continuation of our species (as Richard Dawkins and others have more recently proclaimed), the will to survive, and to survive with the most stuff, is there in all of us, we're told.

But Jesus says paradoxically that we do that at the expense of our very selves. In vv35-37 he talks of losing their identity, their selves, their very souls (it's the same Greek word – ψυκη/psyche – for “*life*” and “*soul*” here) in the desperate desire to satisfy their lust for more. Here's the source of the legend of Faust, who sold his soul to the Devil in order to achieve his own desire. (Or, if you haven't heard of Faust but you watch *The Simpsons*, the story of Bart selling his soul to Milhous for five dollars whilst cleaning the Reverend Lovejoy's organ pipes.) Those of you who are so desperate to accumulate possessions or status or celebrity, think what it is doing to your soul. But all of us need to think how close we are putting our own desires and our own wants to the top of our list of priorities. In the Kingdom of God, where love and compassion are the key characteristics, there can be no place for selfishness. And, after all, what are you going to do with it all when the end comes, when this life is over? As someone once said, “*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep for that which he cannot lose.*”

3. THE DECISION TO TAKE UP THE CROSS

But there's a further consequence for those who are serious about Jesus. Here in v34 we have the first mention of the cross in Mark's story. And it's nothing to do with Jesus. Those who are serious about Jesus have to take up their cross – it's his followers here who are the cross-bearers. Now this has lost a lot of its force for us and has nowhere near the impact it would have had on Jesus' listeners. For us we associate this image of the cross solely with the death of Jesus himself, or we empty completely of any

power by using it in phrases such as “*the cross I have to bear*”, referring to the minor irritation of sharing an office with someone unpleasant or having to cope with frizzy hair when you want it straight.

At the time Jesus was speaking and the time Mark was writing, the only people you ever saw bearing a cross were those who were on their way to be nailed to it. To take up your cross meant to anticipate a grisly and painful death. This is no idle statement. Jesus is saying, “If you’re serious about this, then you’re risking death.” Following Jesus is not a comfortable choice to make. David Coffey, at this year’s *Churches Together In England* Forum, slated those who tried to live a “*low risk, play-it-safe discipleship*” and called people to follow Jesus unreservedly. And once you picked up the cross, that was the end: there was no going back. It is part of our calling as Christians. It is a non-negotiable part of our participation in the life of the Kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus died on the cross to save us from the eternal consequences of our own wrong choices, but the cross can never be limited solely to a means by which Jesus gets us into heaven. In his book *The Challenge of Jesus*, Tom Wright says this: “*We do not – we dare not – simply treat the cross as the thing which saves us ‘personally’, but which can be left behind when we get on with the job.*”

You see, the person who was carrying the cross was going to be crucified on it. He had only one way to go. There was no looking back. If we take seriously the call of Jesus and we take up our cross, we cannot look back, back to the life we used to leave. There can be no nostalgia for the past, no sense of pride in what we think we have achieved ourselves, no sneaking pleasure in the sins of previous years. That has gone.

The person who was carrying the cross had said goodbye to the world. There would be no going back, no enjoying the kind of things he had in the past. That was gone, never to be experienced again. And if we take seriously the call of Jesus and we take up our cross, we cannot go back to those earlier patterns of behaviour, to those old ways of living which were at odds with the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God.

The person who was carrying the cross could have no further plans of his own. His fate lay entirely in the hands of others – those who would lay him down on that wooden beam and hammer the spikes through his wrists, then watch as he writhed and screamed for hours in the scorching Mediterranean sun. If we take seriously the call of Jesus and take up our cross, then our plans for the future are taken out of our hands and we submit ourselves to the leading of God. We allow him and him alone to take us forward.

That’s a scary thought, isn’t it? It’s great to be a part of the Kingdom of God, but it takes total commitment – a renouncing of our own agenda, our own plans and desires – and a complete trust in God. In human terms it’s a risky business, but really there’s nothing to lose by taking up that challenge and everything to lose by rejecting it. But there’s one more decision.

4. THE DECISION TO GO WHERE JESUS LEADS

Those who come after Jesus are to be prepared to “*follow him*”. That’s not just in the sense of going round after him and seeing what’s going on: it’s in the sense of walking his path, following in his footsteps. The way of Jesus is a way of love and compassion and integrity, of holiness. And the way of Jesus, as we’ve seen, leads to death – death of one’s own reliance and emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, death of one’s own dreams and plans, death of one’s own agenda and the adoption of his.

But it’s not a path that *ends* in death. Jesus walked into death as he hung naked and humiliated on that cross, but he walked through it and out the other side. We follow Jesus to death and beyond. As we read in the words just before this passage, Jesus predicted his death and that “*after three days he [must] rise again.*” We follow Jesus into the jaws of death as we accept the totally life-absorbing commitment to

which he calls us, but we know that we can follow him out the other side into a new and endless life in the fulfilled Kingdom of God.

Now that's a great encouragement – an incentive, almost. The first sentence of chapter 9 is one which has always been a source of some debate amongst scholars. What is Jesus on about here? Well, we could spend a very long time talking about it this morning and still not arrive at a definitive conclusion. Let me just say that I am sure (along with most other people) that this is intended to be an encouragement to those who do take seriously the implications of all that Jesus says and does. We won't argue about the details of what Jesus means by "*taste death*", but let's rejoice in the promise that we will see "*the Kingdom of God come with power*". Because that is the way of Jesus.

Now we've looked at four decisions this morning – but they're not four different options, they're a package. If you're serious about Jesus, you take the lot. If you've got the guts, there's a commitment to be made here. Deciding to follow Jesus means denying yourself, not putting your own priorities at the top of the list all the time. It means taking up your cross and recognising that you're not going to look back and there's a tough time ahead. It means walking the way of Jesus, living with integrity and reflecting his love and compassion, facing death and letting Jesus take you through it and out the other side into the glorious reality of the Kingdom of God.

BUT, there are some chilling words here in v38. Lots of people claim to follow Jesus, call themselves Christians, set out with good intentions, but can't face up to the risks, can't hack the commitment – some of you here this morning, maybe. Jesus tells it like it is here. If, in this "*sinful and adulterous generation*" (when has there ever been any other kind of generation?), you end up being ashamed of him, there are very serious consequences, too. Those who call themselves Christians, but find themselves so influenced by the attitudes and values of the world around them, who are so deeply involved with the culture of sin and idolatry (which is what "*adulterous*" really means here) that they are embarrassed by Jesus – well, they're an embarrassment to him too. If you're not prepared to go for it wholeheartedly, to commit yourself to Jesus even though it will mean death, then you're an embarrassment to him.

When the time comes for you to stand in front of your Creator, and Jesus introduces his followers to his Father, if you're not really prepared to follow the way of Jesus then he's going to be put in a very difficult position. He'll be ashamed of you. When he speaks your name to his Father, God will reply, "Him! Surely he's not one of yours? He's lived his life only for himself. He was scared to take the risk of following you. He never spoke up for you or about you. He lived just like everyone else. Oh yes, he might have been in church on a Sunday morning, but that one hour in church made no difference at all to the rest of his week. Don't make me laugh, Son. I wouldn't have him on my team."

What's your decision, then? You'd all call yourselves Christians this morning, I expect. You've all had a glimpse of the Kingdom of God – through these words of Mark and through your own experience. Now it's make-your-mind-up time. Will you walk the way of Jesus, adopting his agenda and walking into death and out the other side with him? Or will you stay an embarrassment to the one to whose name you take, and lose out on the awesome promise of the Kingdom of God? It's your decision – no-one else's – and you don't know how long you've got to make up your mind.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is it important for Mark to note that these words were spoken to the crowds?
2. What do you understand by "*he must deny himself*"? How has that happened in your life, or in the life of someone you know?

3. The cross is a potent symbol of commitment and it is used not only here but also many times in Paul's letters as a way of expressing something of what it means to be a Christian (look at *Romans 6:6*, *Galatians 5:24*, *6:14*). Why is it such a good way of describing this? What does it mean to you?
4. What is v35 all about?
5. Why do you think we are so reluctant to take commitment to Jesus seriously?
6. Do you have any ideas about what Jesus might mean in *9:1*?
7. What one thing have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?