

“LOSING YOUR RESOLVE (Mark 51)”
Mark 14:27-42

I'm sure there are many of you here this morning who made some New Year's resolutions last week. I have no idea what they might have been, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if a number of you are already feeling a bit guilty because you've broken them. It's far easier to make the resolution than it is to keep it – especially if that resolution was made in the rosy glow of New Year's Party or to impress someone else. The resolutions that were made in the passage we've just read were spoken in a very emotive setting and by people who weren't quite sure of the consequences of their pronouncements.

For those of you who might not be regular worshippers with us on Sunday mornings, I ought to explain that we are slowly working our way through the story of Jesus as Mark records it in his gospel. During the Advent and Christmas season we've been looking at some other passages, but we pick the story up again this morning as Jesus has almost arrived at his moment of destiny. Mark (who doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' birth) takes up Jesus' story as he appears on the scene proclaiming a radically new agenda for men and women. In the very first words of his that Mark records, he invites people to “*Repent and believe the good news*” because the Kingdom of God is breaking in to their own world. We have been translating that opening summons as “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine*”.

And during the three years of Jesus' ministry, we have seen him proclaiming that new agenda, describing the Kingdom of God, in all kinds of ways. He has addressed crowds, spoken with individuals, answered questions, posed questions, debated with the gatekeepers of tradition – the Pharisees and teachers of the Law – rebuked and ranted, calmed and consoled. But it has not been all words. He has also offered glimpses of what the Kingdom might be like. He has shown us what this new way of living might be like as he has healed the diseased and disabled, given dignity to the disadvantaged and marginalised, confronted the forces of evil and driven out demons, demonstrated his power over the forces of nature, driven the exploiters and the vested interests from the places of prayer, reached out with his message of hope and wholeness to young and old, men and women, the rich and the poor, Jews and non-Jews in a dramatic demonstration of inclusiveness and grace. Everyone is invited to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Everyone is welcome to enjoy its benefits.

But Jesus has also shown that those who really want to be serious about participation in the life of the Kingdom have to think carefully about the consequences. It will mean giving up the popular agenda of seeking status and acquiring material possessions. It will mean renouncing the opportunity for fame and fortune. It will mean sacrifice and submission and service. It will mean following in the footsteps of a suffering Messiah, one who will himself have to give up everything for the sake of others, one who is so

obedient to the will of God that he will walk into the jaws of death – and (as we shall later see) out the other side. **Becoming** a follower of Jesus the Christ, becoming a Christian, is easy. **Being** a follower of Jesus Christ is the hardest thing in the world.

And at the point in Mark's story which we have reached this morning, the awesome destiny of Jesus is about to be fulfilled. Jesus knows that. We – with hindsight – know that. The disciples who are with him in the olive grove just outside Jerusalem have no idea. Jesus has tried to tell them over and over again. His attempts to prepare them for what is about to happen have become more and more explicit as Mark's story has moved on, but they still can't get their heads round what he's trying to tell them. They know something very significant is about to happen, but they don't know what – and they are certainly unaware of the full horror of what is to occur in the next few hours.

And Jesus knows their weakness. He tells them straight – “*You will all fall away*”. They're going to buckle under the strain – some of them pretty spectacularly. He quotes a few lines from their Hebrew prophets as he has so often done. This time it's from *Zechariah 13:7*, and in the context of that quotation it is obvious that he doesn't expect them to lose their faith in him, but he knows their courage and resolve will fail. Once again Peter is the one to speak first, pledging his undying allegiance to Jesus. His resolve is clear: he will never forsake Jesus. And despite Jesus' clear prediction, he stresses his loyalty. (We've read to the end of the book, haven't we, so we know what really happens!) And then the other disciples add their voices and together proclaim their resolve.

It's not New Year, but they know what they want to do. They have made their resolution. As have we. At this time of year it may well be a New Year's resolution. But there are many other times, too, when we commit ourselves to doing things. And as Christians, that happens again and again. Often, perhaps, we don't even know we're doing it, but every time we sing a song, every time we utter an “Amen” to a prayer, every time we respond to a powerful passage from the Bible (like *Psalms 108:1*) or a rousing invitation from the preacher, we are making a commitment to God. We cannot point the finger at these disciples and forget our own, often extravagant, resolutions.

It's not long, though, before their resolve is tested. Jesus asks for their help as they go into the garden at the foot of the slope of olive groves. All he wants them to do is be there for him, to offer support by their presence and to keep their eyes open for anything untoward. He doesn't even ask them to pray – he's going to do all that. Then he takes his three most trusted friends along with him a few yards away from the others and, moving on a little further, begins to pray himself. Mark tells us that he was “*deeply distressed and troubled*”, which is a bit of an understatement in terms of the translation. The two Greek words used here describe the uttermost despair and anxiety. Jesus is racked with fear and foreboding. If

you've seen *The Passion Of the Christ* you'll have some idea of how emotionally disorientated Jesus was as he wrestled with his destiny.

And while he is struggling with the cosmic consequences of his mission, his closest companions fall asleep – not once, but three times. Within minutes of their protestations of undying loyalty, they have been overcome by their own human weakness. Jesus' words to them must have been heavy with frustration and despair. They couldn't even stay awake a few minutes to offer him the support and encouragement he needed at this pivotal point not only in his own life, but in the history of God's dealings with humanity.

Does any of that ring any bells in your situation? As we've already said, we all resolve to follow Jesus, to commit ourselves entirely and uncompromisingly to him. But it isn't usually very long before those resolutions are undermined by our own limitations, our own weaknesses, our own vulnerability to temptation – even by our circumstances, by what Harold Macmillan referred to as “*Events, dear boy. Events*” when asked why he couldn't keep to all his political promises (now there's an oxymoron!). And it happens again and again, doesn't it? Sometimes we might feel stronger than at others, but there are always those occasions of failure and disappointment. And we can hear Jesus' words ringing down through the centuries. “*The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.*” We don't **want** to let him down, but we do.

In all this, though, Jesus remains strong. Yes, he's going through the emotional wringer. Yes, he's desperately trying to find some way round the inevitable. Yes, he's pleading with his Father to find some other way of fulfilling his mission. But in the end, he has to accept his Father's will and face the destiny that has been his since before the beginning of time. He wrestles with the forces of evil. He struggles with the voices that would try to divert him. Eventually, though, without the help of his disciples, he wins through. Even if his followers are not, he is dependable. He remains faithful to his calling. He prepares to face his ordeal, which is clearly more than simply the pain of crucifixion. He is about to take on himself the sins of all people and to face the awesome wrath of God as he destroys the power of that sin.

And he still does. Jesus is still strong. Even when we find ourselves failing, wavering in our resolve, Jesus remains constant and strong. We may hear his words of rebuke. We may feel a sense of failure, or regret, of guilt. But Jesus is there for us. Even when we have let him down again and again and again – as Peter did (this isn't the first time he's let Jesus down, and we know it's not the last) – even then we can be sure that Jesus will be there for us. As we read in *Psalms 108:4*, “*his faithfulness reaches the skies*”. Even when we let Jesus down, even when our resolve crumbles, he is there for us and he still trusts us.

That's the final lesson from this story. I know we have tried very hard to read this story of Mark's as if it was for the first time and without looking ahead to the things that are still to come, but on this occasion we need to take a peek beyond the crucifixion, beyond the resurrection even. These disciples, who have let Jesus down here and who will soon desert him completely, are the people to whom Jesus returns after his resurrection. These are the men who in a few weeks time will begin to turn the world upside down (or, rather, the right way up again) with their preaching and teaching and praying and miracles. Jesus trusts them enough to leave the entire future of his church on earth in their hands. Isn't that an amazing thought? He still loves them and he still wants them to be involved in his mission.

No matter how many times you have failed to keep to your resolution, Jesus still loves you. Again, that's the message of *Psalms 108:4*. And Jesus not only loves you but wants you to be involved in his work, to keep on trying to do his will here on earth. The fact that you have broken your resolution, that you have failed to keep to your commitment isn't the end of the world. There is still another chance – and another, and another.

Even at this time of despair and distress, Jesus can look to the future and know that there is a sense of hope for himself and for the world. He grapples with the looming reality of his death and abandonment, but is still able to tell his friends that he will see them soon in Galilee (v28). All is not lost. There is an even more glorious future ahead of them.

Jesus asks and expects great things of those who want to take seriously his teaching, those who want to be part of his Kingdom. But he has no illusions about our weaknesses and fallibility. He knows there will be times when we fail him. He knows that when we loudly proclaim our allegiance to him, we will almost certainly be unable to keep it up without the odd hiccup – often far more than an odd hiccup. But he loves you. He knows you and your weaknesses. And in the midst of your difficulties, your doubts, your despair, he is there – faithful as always, loving you and encouraging you, despite your foolish ways. Just keep trusting him, and don't give up making resolutions just because you can't keep all of them all the time.