

“LETTING JESUS DOWN (Mark 54)”

Mark 14:66-72

Well, we're returning this morning to Mark's story of Jesus. If we hadn't done the Lent course, we might have finished the story at the right point around Easter, but now we're looking at it slightly out of time. However, that might help us to reflect on the story a bit more carefully because we won't have all the other baggage of Holy Week and Easter to distract us. I remember once listening to Ralph Gower who, at the time, was one of the senior inspectors at the much maligned Inner London Education Authority. This was in the mid 1980s and he was saying that the great thing about the new local curriculum for RE was that it took the Christian festivals away from their place in the calendar, so you could talk about Easter without it all being messed up with fluffy bunnies and chocolate!

Anyway, unusually the focus in this short passage is not Jesus but Peter. With the exception of a piece about John the Baptist earlier in the story, this is the only part of Mark's gospel that does not have Jesus fully in the spotlight. Jesus himself has been hauled off to the house of the High Priest and is undergoing interrogation by the hastily convened kangaroo court, and Peter has followed him, more out of curiosity than bravery, and finds himself in the courtyard of the house, where he warms himself by the brazier that is burning there. There's a crowd of other curious onlookers and some of the High Priest's staff. While Jesus is inside, facing the most powerful Jewish leaders and calmly responding to their questions and threats, here is Peter, out in the courtyard, scared stiff by a servant girl's questions.

As we said right at the beginning of this series, Mark's story of Jesus is thought by most people to have been compiled from Peter's own reminiscences of Jesus. So this section is certainly not made up (as a few scholars have suggested). The early church would never have made up a story that showed their leader, Peter, in such a bad light. Maybe Peter, forgiven by Jesus after the resurrection, was eager to get this whole episode off his chest and wanted everyone to know that he was indeed a frail and vulnerable individual.

Anyway, the crowd in the courtyard seems not to be terribly sympathetic to Jesus and his followers, and as Peter tries to melt into the background, he finds that he suddenly attracts the attention of a servant girl who starts badgering him with questions, and others join in. He is clearly frightened by the turn events are taking and seeks to distance himself from anything that might lead to his being treated as Jesus is. And remember, this is only a few hours after he has declared his intention to stick by Jesus and never let him down – even to the point of death. But it is interesting to observe his reaction to the three questions and to compare that reaction with his responses to similar things after the resurrection and Pentecost. In *Acts* he responds very differently and in his letters his position is much bolder. Let's just look at them briefly this morning.

1. “YOU WERE WITH HIM” (v67b)

It might have been a half remembered glimpse of the group coming into the High Priest's courtyard that sets the girl off on this question. Or maybe she is curious as to why Peter is behaving so furtively. Whatever the initial reason for her question, there was something that marked Peter out as a companion of Jesus. She knows that Jesus came in with a group of people; possibly she even knows that he came into Jerusalem a few days earlier with a band of followers. So she puts it to him that he was actually with Jesus. But Peter is vehement in his denial. He says he has no idea what she's on about and retreats into what he thinks is the safety of the gateway. There's no way he wants to be identified with the man who is at present being set up by the authorities.

Now, if we flick over to *Acts 4:13*, we find the same authorities making the same observation about Peter (and his companion, John). The same officials – Annas, Caiaphas and other members of the High Priest's family (*Acts 4:6*) – are trying Peter and John because they have been preaching and stirring up the people

in the wake of a miraculous healing in the Temple courtyard. Luke comments that these officials “*were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*” But Peter is no longer wanting to deny it. In fact, the observation is made in the context of Peter’s impassioned defence of Jesus. He is positively proud to be counted as one of Jesus’ followers.

2. **“YOU ARE ONE OF THEM”** (v69)

The girl persists with her questions. “Yes, you are. You’re one of those people who were with Jesus. You’re one of them.” It’s always helpful to label people as “one of us” or “one of them”: it makes life so much simpler, whatever the categories: you know what to think about someone who is not one of us but one of them. Peter is now thought to be one of the group. He keeps company not only with Jesus, but with his followers. He’s implicated in it all – whatever’s going on in the house, Peter’s caught up in it. Another denial. Once more Peter is not willing to be lumped together with people who may turn out to be losers if this trial really does go pear-shaped. There is no way in which he wants to be identified with Jesus’ followers.

But by the time he comes to write his letter to the new Christian churches scattered around the province of Asia Minor, his view is quite different. It is that very sense of fellowship, of companionship that gives us identity as Christians. Being “one of them” is actually something to be proud of, something to strive for. This is what he writes in *1 Peter 2:9,10*: “*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God ... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*” Not only did Peter want to identify himself with Jesus and his followers, but he encouraged all Christians to do so.

3. **“YOU SPEAK LIKE THEM”** (v70)

Although the region of Galilee is relatively close to Jerusalem, in those days there weren’t that many people who travelled between the two places, except at festivals like the one which was going on at this time. People from “up north” were just as easily identifiable by their speech then as they are now. It was known that Jesus and his followers came from “up north” in Galilee, so the now suspicious crowd in the courtyard see Peter’s accent and dialect as further indication that he is part of the Jesus group. In the works of contemporary writers there are many references to the urban population of Jerusalem making fun of the accents of Galileans, just as today comedians can get cheap laughs by mimicking Geordies, Scousers and people from the Black Country or rural Somerset.

But Peter comes out with his third and strongest denial, actually calling down curses on himself to emphasise his point. And then, as dawn begins to break, he hears a cock crowing and Jesus’ prophetic words (*Mark 14:30*) suddenly come back to him and he bitterly regrets what he has said, bursting into tears with the shame and the stress of the moment.

And yet, looking back at *Acts 4:20*, we find that Peter, now emboldened by the resurrection and filled with the Holy Spirit, has no qualms about speaking for Jesus. As he stands before the priests and officials, who notice that he is “*unschooled and ordinary*” – he hasn’t had his accent and the earthiness of his northern speech educated out of him – he just keeps talking about Jesus. And when they tell him and John that their preaching has to stop, Peter replies “*We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*” There’s no longer any attempt to keep quiet. They are just so full of Jesus and his gospel that they have to keep telling everyone about it. And when he writes his pastoral letter, he exhorts others to follow his example (*1 Peter 3:15*).

What a series of contrasts! And yet those alternative responses are open to us all. How do we respond? As Peter in the courtyard, unsure of what was to happen? Or as Peter after the resurrection and Pentecost, full of confidence and full of the Holy Spirit? We know what happened. We know Jesus is alive. We

know we have the power and confidence of the Holy Spirit. But we still find ourselves prevaricating, don't we?

We all have things that identify us as followers of Jesus, even if we might try to hide them from others at times. When other people pick up on the fact that we are Christians, how do we react? What is our response? However much you might try to conceal the fact that you're a follower of Jesus Christ (and I must admit, I'm not entirely sure how you can claim to be a follower if you keep it secret), there will be tell-tale signs.

People will say "*You were with him*" as they see you coming out of church or disappearing off on Sunday morning in your best clothes. A dear old lady in my last church, who lived in a cul-de-sac where several other members of her family also had homes, when she first committed her life to Christ and started to come to church, used to slip out the back door and up an alley on Sunday mornings so that no-one would ask where she was going. (It didn't take her long to realise that she really needed to go out the front door!) Maybe you have a fish badge or a cross that, however discreetly you may try to hide it, gives you away.

People will say "*You're one of them*" when you're spotted out with someone they definitely know to be a Christian, or a Christian friend rings you at work and leaves a message about the prayer meeting. You are invited out by a colleague or a neighbour and you have to decline because you're already committed to something at the church. The company you keep can give you away as well.

People will say "*You speak like them*" when you use an odd phrase or some little quirk of Christian vocabulary, when you stand out at your workplace or sports club because you don't swear as often as everyone else.

How will you respond? Will it be something along the lines of "Well, I only go now and again" or "I just go to keep my partner and kids happy" or "I try to do my best, like we all do" – some bland and inoffensive response that gives the impression that being a Christian is an odd little habit you have that doesn't really affect your life? You don't really want to get into a discussion about it and you certainly don't want anyone thinking they can take the mick out of you for it. It's much safer just to deny that it's anything important, isn't it?

Or you do reply, "Well, since you mention it, yes, Jesus has transformed my life in all kinds of ways, and he's the focus and goal of all that I do and all that I am. And he can do the same for you too." That's what Peter was getting at when he wrote those words in *1 Peter 3:15*.

When Peter realised what he'd done there in the High Priest's courtyard, he broke down and wept. As it happened, there was plenty of time for restoration. Despite this and other failures, Peter was forgiven by Jesus and commissioned to take on the work of building the church that Jesus saw as the herald of his kingdom's arrival. He had time to bounce back and he was used in amazing ways by God – as we have seen in part this morning.

But we don't know how much time we have left. When we lose an opportunity to witness for Jesus, we can't be sure how many more opportunities there will be. We cannot be sure if that person to whom we should have spoken more positively about our faith will get another chance to respond. And, rather chillingly, Jesus has said that if we're not prepared to speak out for him, then he won't speak out for us when we stand before his Father at the end of our life. Look what he said in *Mark 8:38* – or in *Matthew 10:32,33* where it is translated much more starkly. What's your response? Peter in the courtyard, or Peter after the resurrection? After all, you have the benefit of hindsight.

(Housegroup notes follow on next page)

"LETTING JESUS DOWN (Mark 54)"

Mark 14:66-72

Peter has followed Jesus and those who arrested him into the courtyard of the High Priest's house. While Jesus is inside, facing the most powerful officials of the Jewish people, Peter is in the courtyard, sacred stiff by the questions of a servant girl. (This gospel is thought to have been written by Mark from Peter's reminiscences, so there is no doubt that this episode happened as it is related here.)

Peter's responses to the curious questioning of the High Priest's staff are in marked contrast to the ways in which he responded to similar situations after the resurrection and Pentecost.

1. "You were with him" (v67b)

There was something about Peter that marked him out as a friend of Jesus, but he was vehement in his denial. Later, in *Acts 4:13*, the same comment is made, but this time in the context of an impassioned defence of Jesus.

2. "You are one of them" (v69)

Peter is thought to be one of the group of disciples – he keeps company not only with Jesus, but also with his other followers. Again, Peter denies this. Yet it is that very fellowship that Peter says in *1 Peter 2:9,10* gives us identity as Christians. It is something to be proud of.

3. "You speak like one of them" (v70)

Peter's Galilean accent and vocabulary (much mocked at the time of Christ) are further evidence of his origins and supposed complicity in Jesus' situation. The third denial is the most vehement and Peter curses. The he hears the cock crow and is filled with remorse. In *Acts 4:20* Peter is proud of his enthusiasm for speaking as he does and in *1 Peter 3:15* her exhorts others to follow his example.

We all have things that identify us as Christians – the symbols we wear, the company we keep, the language we use (or don't use), and so on, so what is our response when others question us. Are we like Peter before the crucifixion or after the resurrection? Peter had time to be forgiven and restored. We don't know how much time we might have – and Jesus tells us that we might find ourselves regretting the consequences of our unwillingness to speak for him (*Mark 8:38, Matthew 10:32,33*).

---oOo---

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the things which might identify you as a Christian? How ready are you to allow those signs to be seen?
2. What factors can influence the way we respond to questions about our faith?
3. Why are we so often reticent to admit to being followers of Jesus Christ and to recommend Jesus to others?
4. How can we build our confidence in order to witness?
5. How can we encourage one another in our witness?
6. Do you have any new insights into this passage you'd like to share with others in the group?

A useful book –

Lost For Words: For all who think evangelism is not for them
by James Lawrence (BRF/CPAS)