

Mark 8:31-38

Mark is a Good Friday Gospel in the sense that the cross is central to his understanding of Jesus and the nature of discipleship. It is fitting that this first prediction of the cross and cross-bearing in today's gospel passage is a Lenten lesson. Jesus enters a new phase of his ministry "when he began to teach them." This is Mark's signal that the disciples will hear a word from Jesus unlike prior teaching, a message for which they are not prepared.

As Mark says, "Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk. 8:31).

In a previous passage, Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah and received astonishing praise from Jesus. Jesus had never claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. Indeed, he discouraged the use of the title on several occasions since it was obvious to him that the popular view of the Messiah of his day was far different from his own.

The popular idea at the time was that the Messiah would be a new "David." He would overcome Israel's enemies, secure independence and establish a rule of justice for all God's people. David's reign had secured many of these objectives yet, shortly after David, the system of justice had broken down and the kingdom fell apart. New and powerful enemies had risen and Israel's independence lost.

At first, Jesus prediction of his passion was too much for the disciples to bear, especially Peter, the one who had just answered Jesus, "You are the Christ." Peter, out of love and concern for Jesus, began to rebuke him: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" (Mt. 16:22). But Jesus gives Peter, and through him, the other disciples, the strongest rebuke he gives anyone in the New Testament: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

We can't blame Peter for wanting to save Jesus from pain, suffering and death. But there is more involved here than a devoted disciple trying to protect the teacher he loves and follows. Following Jesus is not an easy walk in the park with all smiles and joyous feelings.

Peter should have known better, after all, he's following the prophet Jesus. If Peter had reflected on the history of his people he would have remembered how the Hebrew prophets were often rejected, even killed. Jesus' disciples are being called to get behind and follow him. Jesus now began to teach his disciples that victory and glory did indeed lie ahead, but the prelude to victory would be humiliation, suffering and death.

Jesus' sayings that follow are sometimes referred to as the "cost of discipleship" teachings: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). Jesus went on to say that anyone who wished to be his disciple must also be prepared to face death on a cross.

The expression, "carry his cross," would immediately bring to mind the grim form of execution known as crucifixion, the ultimate Roman punishment. The condemned person sentenced to crucifixion carried the upper part of the wooden crossbeam to the execution site. For early Christians, the sacrificial meaning of this image would be crystal clear. The figure of a condemned person carrying the instrument of his or her death provided a graphic image of self-sacrifice, perhaps more than any other conceivable metaphor.

By the time Mark wrote his gospel the first great persecution of Christians had taken place in Rome (64 CE). The emperor Nero made Christians, including Peter and Paul, the scapegoats for the fire that had destroyed more than half the city. Large numbers of Christians were martyred by crucifixion and the church in Rome was shocked and shattered by these events. Jesus words, quoted by Mark, were a challenge to Christians to be ready to face death if need be. To seek to escape a martyr's death and hold on to life to save oneself was to lose one's true life.

What possible meaning can these words of Jesus have for Christians today? How does our Christian faith flourish in a culture which is centered on self-interest and self-fulfillment?

The shocking thing about Jesus for our time, according to Henri Nouwen (1992), is that "God chose the descending way of Jesus to reveal his love for us. And it's very important for us to see that and reflect on it: It is such a great, great sign for us that Jesus chose the downwardly mobile way to be together with us at the same table. It's God's way for Jesus and it's God's way for us."

Is there a way to God's kingdom that by-passes the cross? Clearly Jesus is saying that there is no other way. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mk. 8:35).

Again, Henri Nouwen, "Jesus presents to us the great mystery of the descending way. It is the way of suffering, but also the way of healing. It is the way of humiliation but also the way to the resurrection. It is the way of tears, but of tears that turn into tears of joy. It is the way of hiddenness, but also the way that leads to the light that will shine for all people. It is the way of persecution, oppression, martyrdom, and death, but also the way to the full disclosure of God's love" (1992).

On our Lenten journey we will hear Jesus call us to yield to God's purposes and not claim divine sanction for our own aims. Yes, by picking up our cross and following the descending way of Jesus, we may end up just like he did. Perhaps not on a wooden cross, but crucified just the same. Jesus is saying, "Don't be afraid. You and I know what is on the other side of the cross. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Resources: Synthesis, 2009, 2015; Henri Nouwen, "Show Me the Way," 1992; "From Fear To Love," 1998; Fred Craddock, et al, "Preaching The New Common Lectionary," 1984.