

## **Mark 8:31-38 - The Way of the Cross.**

I woke up this morning, and forgot which direction the sun rises from - then it dawned on me.

I mean, so what if I don't know what Armageddon means - it's not the end of the world!

I recently decided to sell my vacuum cleaner - all it was doing was gathering dust!

I just wrote a song about totillas - but then I realised it was more of a rap.

I went into a shop to buy a watch and the shop guy said "Analogue"? and I said, no, just a watch.

Some of you obviously found those few one-liners funny. Some of you didn't. If you didn't, perhaps it's because you didn't "get them". That's what makes a joke funny, isn't it - when you "get it".

Some of the greatest truths in life, you know, also depend on our "getting it".

In our Gospel reading today, we have someone who didn't get it. And we can't be too hard on him, because he was not alone - then or now.

We'll understand this morning's passage from the Gospel of Mark a little better if back up a couple of verses, where we find Peter's bold and inspired confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

You'll remember the context: Jesus asked the disciples who people thought he was. They rattled off what they'd heard - John the Baptist come to life; Elijah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked them who THEY thought he was, and Peter spoke out this wonderful confession. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It sounds like they finally got it, doesn't it? But no, not at all.

In today's passage, it's quite obvious that the disciples still had a way to go in their understanding.

We read in verse 31, "Then he began to teach them 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."

Jesus' words were a pretty clear prediction of where he expected things to go. Peter was horrified! We read, "He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him."

You can imagine it, can't you? Peter, taking Jesus by the arm, and leading him away from the others... "Lord, what are you saying? You can't be serious! How could you even think about letting them do that? You're our deliverer! You can't die - you need to fight them!"

For Jesus, Peter's lack of understanding must have come as a great disappointment. More than that, Peter's rebuke would have caused a flashback into the wilderness where Satan tried to get Jesus to give up the way of the cross, instead taking the way of the earthly conqueror. You'll remember how Satan tempted Jesus to show off his power, and to bow before him, and he'd give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. Jesus recognised that Satan had come back, this time disguised in the caring love of His closest friend.

Jesus didn't dare take the time to debate the issue. In a dramatic gesture, he immediately resisted Satan. v 33 says, "turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Earlier, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, his confession came out of his Jewish understanding of who the Christ would be and what he would do. The Christ was a figure of power and might, sent by the Father. The Christ would deliver Israel, and restore her supremacy ! Yes, the Messiah might serve the people as Jesus had been doing, preaching and healing, but as yet, the disciples saw this as a lead up to the final display of power, where Jesus would rise up and overthrow the Romans.

So with that in mind, we can begin to understand why Peter was so adamant that what Jesus predicted couldn't possibly happen. It just didn't fit with their understanding of the Messiah at that time.

Jesus patiently gathered the crowd and his disciples around him, and explained the way of the cross:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.

Jesus was turning the whole concept of the Kingdom of God on it's head. It was not to be a kingdom to be won and held by might - even if that might was seen to be God's. It was not a kingdom of power, but a kingdom of sacrifice and service.

The human face of the Church has always struggled with this concept. The emperor Constantine - who reigned in the 3rd century - became a Christian. He was very taken with his new faith, and because he was the Emperor, and had the power to do so, he ordered his entire kingdom to convert to Christianity. Enter what we call "Christendom" - the rule of the Church.

Throughout history, the Church, as an institution, sought to exercise and maintain power over its people - perceived to be for for their own good, of course.

Yet this struggle for power has been the source of much bloodshed - think of the English Crusades.

The struggle for power has been source of corruption - think of the pre-reformation Church, with it's corrupt Popes, its amassing of riches, and its rigid control over the people.

You would think, wouldn't you, as the centuries have passed, the institutional Church would 'get it'. Yet twenty centuries after Jesus, the Church - as an institution - still has the same struggle understanding the way of the cross.

The things that have historically brought the Church unstuck - money, sex and power - still bring her unstuck today. We've just been through the most horrendous Royal Commission in to Child Sexual Abuse. Amongst the perpetrators? Christians in positions of influence and power.

Having made these depressing observations, however, the Church is not just made up of those who 'don't get it'. It is also made up of those who 'do.'

The Church has also been responsible for much that has brought succour, healing, freedom and justice - those very things that Christ has called us to do.

The church championed the cause for the abolition of slavery; the church pioneered the provision of hospitals, schools, orphanages, missions, charities - so much that has helped to put right injustice.

The Church has always been - and always will be - a mix of saints and sinners. A mix of those who understand the way of the cross and live by it, and those who don't.

How can we better understand this counter-cultural way that Christ calls us to live? - this Way of the Cross?

Jesus didn't mince words with Peter: "You are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things."

To understand the way of the cross, we need the transforming power of the Spirit at work within us as individuals, within our leadership, and so within our institution.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We need to actively present ourselves to God, allowing him to renew our minds, so that we 'get it' - so that we see the world and our place in it through his eyes..

As our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit, we can't help but see the world differently. As Paul says, we then "discern what is the will of God - what is good, acceptable and perfect."

We find that we can recognise those situations where Jesus would have us serve, rather than be served; where we choose the godly response to a situation rather than the self-serving response; where we are willing to stand up for Jesus and declare our faith, regardless of the consequences; where we recognise what is wrong and unjust in the world around us, and determine to change it.

When I was driving to Goulburn yesterday to the ordination service at the Cathedral, I was listening to Vision Radio. The segment called "The Word For Today" with Bob Gass came on.

The gist of it was this: Don't allow feelings of inadequacy to put you off serving God; don't allow your failures to rob you of your confidence in him. Remember that Abraham lied to protect his interests; Moses was a murderer; Jacob was con man, Gideon was a coward; Jonah was totally disobedient; David - the friend of God - was an adulterer and a murderer. Yet as they gave themselves to God, they were forgiven, renewed and empowered to

serve him. When you feel inadequate, for whatever reason, put your trust in God, and leave it there”

Therein lies the secret to discerning the Way of the Cross. It's our willingness to present ourselves Jesus as we are - as a living sacrifice; and to allow him to transform us by the power of his Spirit, so that we can discern his ways.

Let me finish by once again reminding us of our Lord's words:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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."