

Oxymoron – Jesus the suffering Messiah

25 February 2024 – Lent 2

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;
I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.

I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;

I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

He who vindicates me is near.

Who then will bring charges against me?

Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?

Let him confront me!

It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.

Who will condemn me?

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'

They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

‘But what about **you?**’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah.’

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.’

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE [Oxymoron – Jesus the suffering Messiah](#)

Part 1

Jesus is full of surprises. We think that we’ve worked Jesus out and then he says or does something unexpected or outrageous or amazing.

In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus asks the disciples who the crowds think that he is. It’s a strange sort of question.

And it elicits an odd series of answers.

To the casual observer, Jesus is a teacher who often seems to speak in riddles and a healer, which may point to him being a prophet.



This is what the quick public opinion poll among the disciples suggests ...

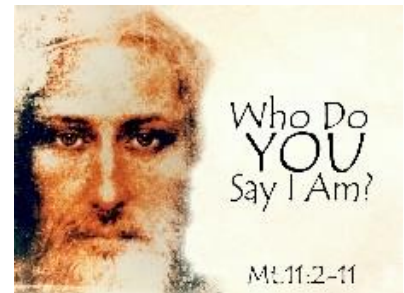
Some people think that you're John the Baptist back from the dead.

Others think you might be Elijah, the prophet who heralds the end times. Some think you're like Moses, feeding people in the wilderness with manna.

But who do you say that I am?

This is the crucial question for the disciples and for ourselves.

It's probably not too much of a stretch to suggest that this is the key question that the whole of the New Testament is asking ... who is Jesus?



How someone answers this question reveals a lot about their faith and commitment to following Jesus. It also invites follow up questions such as 'Who then is God?' and, relevant for our passage today, 'Why did Jesus have to die?'.

Again, how one answers these questions also reveals a lot about our faith.



Peter's response 'You are the Messiah (or Christ or King)' seems to earn him a gold star from Jesus, at least initially. Peter has joined the dots around Jesus' message about the kingdom of God, his healing ministry, his authority over evil spirits who name Jesus as the Holy One of God or Son of God, Jesus' feeding of the crowds from meagre resources

and his command over the forces of nature.

The thing about naming Jesus as the Messiah is that the title comes with a whole load of expectations and baggage. Hence Jesus' caution not to tell people.

The expectations of the Messiah can be found in various Jewish Scriptures and in the writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, written just before the time of Jesus by the community of the **Essene** sect of zealous Jews who lived guess where ... down near the Dead Sea!

In short, the Messiah was expected to:

cleanse and purify the Temple operations in Jerusalem – more on this in next week's reading

defeat the armies of Israel's enemies – in Jesus' time this would be the Romans – and usher in a glorious era of peace that could possibly be described in terms of the kingdom of God

rule in Jerusalem with justice and righteousness – so stamp out any corruption or injustice

The Scripture texts to support these hopes that Peter would have been taught include ones like Isaiah 11 where the shoot from the stump of Jesse – the Messiah – will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and slay the wicked and then rule with righteousness. Peter probably had his own view as to how each of these messianic roles would be accomplished, but that was the basic job description.

What was definitely **not** part of the Messiah's job description was any reference to suffering, rejection, death or resurrection. So when Jesus starts to talk plainly about what he foresees happening, this doesn't compute for Peter and he starts rebuking or censuring Jesus.



Texts like Isaiah 50 that we read earlier that speaks of God's servant being mocked and spat upon and suffering spiteful harm were not considered to apply to the Messiah, although as Christians we have been taught to read them as applying to Jesus.

We know what happened on Good Friday.

But for Peter, using Messiah and suffering in the same sentence was an oxymoron – putting two self-contradictory words together.

Other examples of an oxymoron include:

deafening silence

original copy

virtual reality

A suffering or rejected Messiah just didn't make sense to Peter.

It seems that Jesus wasn't in a mood to debate the finer points with Peter and suggests that Peter's vision for a triumphant, non-suffering, warrior type Messiah is actually a temptation from Satan, a temptation for Jesus to follow his own path to glory rather than follow God's path.



All of which seems to overturn or confuse centuries of Jewish hope for what the Messiah would do. It seems that Jesus had discerned a rather different path ahead than what Peter and the other disciples were expecting or hoping for. And to make matters harder for Peter and the others, Jesus claims the path he will walk is in fact the will of God for the Messiah.

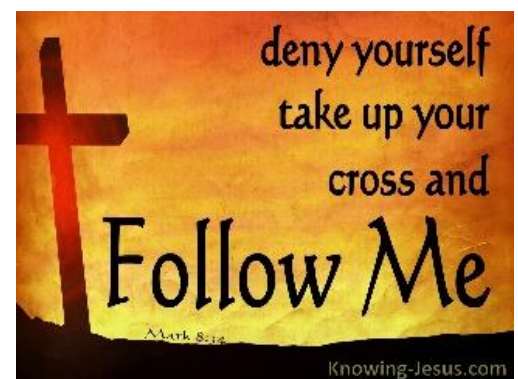
So Peter got part of the puzzle exactly right – Jesus is the Messiah – but got the other part of the puzzle completely wrong according to Jesus.

Part 2

Which brings us to part 2 of the story when Jesus calls together the disciples and the crowd and starts teaching about the implications of what he has already shared with the disciples about his own future.

This is where things get uncomfortable.

Not only will Jesus be rejected and suffer, but his followers will also suffer. Jesus calls them to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow after him.



We've heard these words multiple times so they have lost some of their shock value. But in Roman times, those who took up a cross like Jesus were being led out to die in a ghastly fashion. Enough to say that it was an excruciatingly painful way to die in full public view. Romans used this cruel form of execution as a visible deterrent to other would-be rebels.

So for Jesus to ask his followers to take up their cross is simply shocking.

Disturbing. Disrupting. Discombobulating. Insert your own word ...

It's implying much more than simple inconvenience. It suggests being willing to walk with Jesus whatever the cost, even if that cost turns out to be your own life. It's a brutally hard teaching.

But Jesus isn't finished yet. He unpacks this dilemma a bit further.

Many of us – most of us – most of the time – will do whatever we can to preserve our life. It's what our medical system is really good at doing in most cases. But Jesus teaches that this attitude of clinging to our mortal life is ultimately of limited value. We can gain the whole world, but we're still all going to die one day. And so, Jesus teaches, it's better to hold lightly onto our current life and invest instead in the life to come, eternal life, life spent in God's presence.

This is teaching that we find difficult. But this isn't the only place it appears on the lips of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, Jesus teaches not to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear but rather think about today and what you can do today in building up God's kingdom., and so build up treasure in heaven.



This includes of course how we treat our neighbours, even how we treat our enemies, living rightly, showing kindness, being generous. As we live in this way Jesus says, we will be storing up treasure for ourselves in heaven.

The message from today's passage in Mark is similar. If we want to find life – psuche in Greek – and save our soul, that essence of us that is thought to live on after death – then we will embrace the way of Jesus and follow in his footsteps, even if this means denying ourselves and accepting suffering as possibilities.

This is Jesus' way of discipleship, if we are to follow Jesus as our model or pattern for how to live. ... But we think if only Jesus had left out the bit about self-denial and suffering and taking up one's cross!

Alternatively, we can hear today's passage as a call to embrace life, full and abundant life in the way Jesus demonstrated, and choose to follow Jesus whole-heartedly, despite the cost involved. That is the way to embrace God's life and in turn to be embraced in God's forever love.

Unfortunately Jesus doesn't offer us the easy option we would rather choose – live the good life here and now and don't rock the boat by seeking after justice and mercy – but then still expect to be rewarded in heaven.

This is where our faith can trip us up.

Yes, we are saved by faith through grace – as the apostle Paul puts it – we don't earn our way to heaven.

Yet receiving grace and forgiveness from God comes with responsibility, responsibility to live in the manner of Jesus, following in the footsteps of Jesus, even if this means suffering.

Losing your life only to save it.

This is the paradox of our Easter faith.

CANDLE LITURGY

On this second Sunday of Lent,
we remember that Jesus took up
the responsibility of his journey to the cross.

**We too are called to take up
the responsibility of Christian discipleship.**

We extinguish this candle of responsibility
**even as we accept the responsibility of right living,
working for God's peace in the world.**

