

BIBLE READINGS

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

Psalm 2:1–9 (Good News Bible)

Why do the nations plan rebellion?

Why do people make their useless plots?

Their kings revolt,

**their rulers plot together against the Lord
and against the king he chose.**

“Let us free ourselves from their rule,” they say;

“let us throw off their control.”

From his throne in heaven the Lord laughs

and mocks their feeble plans.

Then he warns them in anger

and terrifies them with his fury.

“On Zion, my sacred hill,” he says,

“I have installed my king.”

“I will announce,” says the king, “what the Lord has declared.

He said to me: ‘You are my son;

today I have become your father.

Ask, and I will give you all the nations;

the whole earth will be yours.

You will break them with an iron rod;

you will shatter them in pieces like a clay pot.”

Mark 8:22–9:29



They came to Bethsaida, where some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. Jesus placed his hands on him and asked him, “Can you see anything?” The man looked up and said, “Yes, I can see people, but they look like trees walking around.” Jesus again placed his hands on the man's eyes. This time the man saw everything clearly.



Then Jesus and his disciples went away to the villages near Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Tell me, who do people say I am?" "Some say that you are John the Baptist. Others say that you are Elijah, while others say that you are a prophet."



"What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."



Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the Elders, the chief Priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life." He made all this very clear to them. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. "Get away

from me, Satan," Jesus said. "Your thoughts don't come from God but from a human mindset!"

Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. "If any of you want to become my followers, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! There is nothing you can give to regain your life. If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless generation, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain, where they were alone. Suddenly a change came over Jesus, and his skin and clothes became shining white. Then the three disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. Peter spoke up: “Teacher, it’s good that we’re here! We will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He was so frightened that he didn’t know what to say.



Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my own dear Son—listen to him!” They took a quick look around but did not see anyone else; only Jesus was with them. As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has risen from death.” They started discussing among themselves, “What does this ‘rising from death’ mean?”

When they joined the rest of the disciples, they saw a large crowd gathered. A man in the crowd said, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, because he has an evil spirit in him and cannot talk. I asked your disciples to drive the spirit out, but they could not.” Jesus said to them, “How unbelieving you people are! How long do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy here to me!” They brought him to Jesus.



As soon as the spirit saw Jesus, it threw the boy into a fit, so that he fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. His father said “Have pity on us and help us, if you can!”

Jesus said, “Everything is possible for the person who has faith.”

The father cried out, “I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more!”

Jesus gave a command and the evil spirit screamed and came out from the boy.

Jesus took him by the hand and helped him stand up.

MESSAGE – Following Jesus the suffering Messiah

I wonder how you respond when you receive unexpected news, especially if it's **bad** news?

- It could be a medical diagnosis – someone you love has a serious illness or condition that may not be treatable



- It could be about a failing relationship in your family



- It could be further unwelcome Covid lockdowns

Our initial response to such news may be **shock** or **denial** or **anger** – but it can really rock our world and jolt us out of our comfort zone.

In today's reading from Mark there is plenty of unexpected news. First – Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the promised Messiah, but then learns that Jesus is going to be killed! I suspect Peter didn't hear many of Jesus' words beyond this – it was all too overwhelming for his imagination to cope with. Jesus the Messiah is going to die? No way!

Jesus then shares more hard news ... if anyone wants to continue on as his disciple, the journey will not be easy ... rather they'd better all learn about self-denial and suffering ... because that comes with the territory of following Jesus. Was there shock? Puzzled expressions?

Stunned silence may have been closer to the mark.

And then just a few days later, more odd things happen with Jesus – who is transformed in appearance before a voice speaks from a cloud with a challenging message for the disciples. It's all a bit weird and a whole lot disturbing.

Today's reading marks a turning point in Mark's story as we complete Act 1 and move into Act 2. The first 8 chapters of this Gospel comprise Act 1 – that introduces Jesus and his remarkable ministry of teaching and healing. The key question that we're asked in this first half of Mark's story is **'Who is this Jesus?'** The disciples aren't quite sure, and neither are groups like the Pharisees or even King Herod.

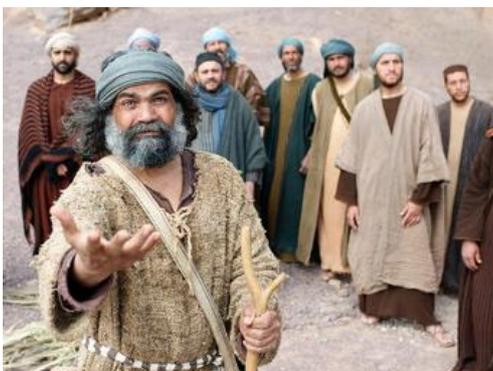
Before we hear Peter's insight, there is a healing story about a blind man. While this may be just one more healing episode, it's significant that these central chapters in the Gospel are flanked by two stories of blind people being healed, here and then the story of Bartimaeus as Jesus travels to Jerusalem. In this first story, the man is initially blind, then sees partially and finally has clear sight. It's as if Mark is asking those listening to his story – people like us – whether we are blind to the true identity of Jesus, or whether we've partially grasped the truth or whether we see Jesus clearly for who he is.

Then we reach a pivotal or hinge moment as Jesus asks the disciples **who the crowds think he is**. Some think Elijah, some John the Baptist or perhaps a prophet, because Jesus' message seems to fit the mantle of a prophet.



Jesus then asks the same question of the disciples ...

'Who do you say I am?'



Peter responds with the answer we've known since the opening verse of the whole Gospel ... Jesus is the **Messiah** or **Christ**, the hoped for **king** and deliverer of Israel. That's who Jesus is!

So while he may appear to be a **prophet** – which by the way is how Muslims view Jesus – or a **false Messiah** – which is the usual Jewish view of Jesus –

Peter gets it right for once. Jesus is in fact the Messiah!

That same question is also being asked of us the reader ... who do **we** say that Jesus is? Each of us needs to come to our own response.

No sooner has Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, than Jesus starts telling the disciples **what sort of Messiah he will be**. He will be a **suffering messiah** who will be rejected by the religious establishment in Jerusalem and killed. Mysteriously, three days later he will rise to new life.



This is all too much for Peter who starts to rebuke Jesus for having such a mistaken understanding of the Messiah's role. As we heard in Psalm 2, the Messiah or King was expected to rule over the nations and break them into pieces with an iron rod. Hence, if Jesus truly is the Messiah, as identified by Peter, then the thought of him being rejected and killed just wasn't part of the script. Jesus, however, views Peter's populist interpretation of the Messiah's role to be a temptation from Satan that must be resisted. His path will be one of **suffering** and **this will become the major theme of Act 2 of Mark's Gospel**.

The news gets worse. Not only will Jesus not be a conquering hero, but his way of suffering will become a pattern for all his followers. They too will need to be prepared to walk the way of suffering, to take up their own cross and so to follow Jesus. There is no other alternative according to Jesus. In an upside down way, those **who do lose their life** by following Jesus and the gospel message will **find true life**.



Act 2 of the Gospel story, then, is all about **rewriting expectations** about the Messiah and his role. As Christians, we must learn again and again that we follow a suffering and crucified Saviour. The symbol of our faith is a **cross**, a Roman instrument of cruelty and death, that, as we will see later, becomes the doorway to new life.

Jesus hard-hitting message about his death simply does not compute for the disciples. Jesus' words seem a bit like a bad dream that you hope to wake up from soon. They thought they were on the **winning** team ... but it now sounds as if they might be on the **nightmare** team that leads down a dark road to suffering and death. And they don't want to know ...

There's one more important episode in these hinge stories and that's the incident we know as **the Transfiguration**, which is also a bit dreamlike as Jesus' appearance suddenly changes and he's seen talking with two people identified as Elijah and Moses. There is also a cloud and a voice from the cloud – presumed to be God's voice – that identifies Jesus as God's Son – another title for the Messiah or King – and that says **'listen to him!'**.



So the highest authority in the Gospel – the voice of God – affirms that Jesus is indeed God's Son and commands the disciples to listen to him. This is important for both the disciples and us to hear – in light of what Jesus has been sharing about his pathway of suffering. This unlikely path for the Messiah is effectively being affirmed by God. The disciples need to listen to what Jesus is telling them – however hard it is to comprehend.

The changed appearance of Jesus – shining like the sun – gives the disciples a glimpse of Jesus' future glory that awaits after his death on the cross. So – just to stretch the imagination of the disciples even further – Jesus will be **both a suffering and a glorified** messiah.

At this stage of the story the disciples seem unable to grasp either concept.

What lessons might we take from the readings today?

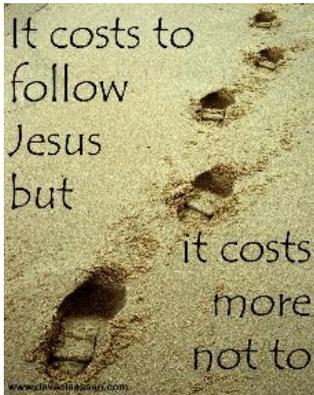
First is the upside down nature of God's kingdom. Who would think that the way to live a full and abundant life was through **denying**



ourselves and focusing on serving others? Our world constantly tells us the **opposite** message – especially through ads on TV – that the way to an abundant life is by looking after your **own** needs.

Hence we may resonate with the cry of the father in the final healing story ... 'I believe ... but help me overcome my doubts!'. The way forward in our journey of faith comes in the Transfiguration story with the call to **listen** to Jesus. If we rely on our own wisdom and tendency to preserve our own comfort, we will struggle.

Somehow we need to keep listening to Jesus and keep trusting in Jesus even when our way seems dark and difficult.



A second lesson for our journey is to count both the **cost** and the **value** of following Jesus. The Gospel of Mark emphasises there is a **real cost** to following Jesus. Although he promises us rest for our souls, he gives no suggestion that our life will become **easier** if we follow him. Rather, our life will probably become more difficult.

It costs us to follow Jesus – but in the following, something important is gained – we become more complete or whole people and can share life together in community – as Jesus intended.

SONG See yourself ... picks up the call to walk in the footsteps of Jesus