**Mark’s Gospel: *Jesus and the Kingdom***

**Sunday November 10, 2019**

**Mark #10: “Who Do You Say that I Am?” (Mark 8:27-38)**

**1. Introduction: *The $10, 000 Cross***

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969), farmer, Greek scholar, founder of Koinonia Farm, author of the Cotton Patch Gospels, and devoted follower of Jesus, tells the story of the time when another pastor was giving him a tour of his new church building. With pride the pastor pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. He boasted that the church's cross had cost $10,000. “*Brother*,” Jordan said, “*you got cheated. Times were when Christians could get them for nothing*” (*Clarence Jordan: Essential Writings,* p. 32).

Clarence Jordan’s response to this pastor points out the huge difference between what the cross stood for in the first century as opposed to modern times. In the first century the cross was a brutal instrument of state-sponsored execution. It was a horrible way to die. Jesus Christ was executed on a Roman cross, enduring the terrible violence of a world turned against him. Yet this same cross was the means by which we are forgiven and can enjoy friendship with God. So, this symbol has taken on a whole new meaning for Christians. This is why we have crosses at the front of our churches and wear them around our necks. The paradox of Christianity is that something so awful was transformed into a celebrated symbol of God’s most wonderful act. But we should never loose sight of its original significance. For the pastor in Clarence Jordan’s story, the cross had become a symbol of his church’s opulence – a gilded emblem adorning the sanctuary. But there was a time, as Jordan pointed out, when Christians were nailed to crosses for daring to confess Jesus as Lord. They paid for their crosses with their lives.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus challenges his followers to take up their crosses and follow him (Mark 8:34). When Jesus speaks these words to us, he’s not asking us to hang a cross around our neck. He’s inviting us to lay it all on the line for him, to give up our very lives for him. To take up one’s cross is to follow Jesus to the place of execution.

**2. Peter’s Confession: *“You are the Messiah”***

This morning’s Gospel lesson begins with Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). This is an important question because in Mark’s Gospel almost everybody has an opinion about the identity of Jesus. The reader knows from the start who Jesus is since the Gospel opens with these important words, “The beginning of the gospel of *Jesus Christ*, *the Son of God*” (Mark 1:1). However, as the narrative unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that most people, even those closest to Jesus, lacked adequate insight into his identity and mission. Even though God the Father affirmed Jesus’ identity when he declared, “You are my beloved son” at his baptism (Mark 1:9), others seemed clueless. When Jesus forgave a man’s sins, the experts in religious law called him a blasphemer (Mark 2:7). The religious leaders also called him an agent of Satan because he freed people from demonic control (Mark 3:23). Some others called him a crazy man(Mark 3:21). The people from his hometown questioned his ability to teach wisdom and perform miracles as they remarked, “Isn’t he Mary’s son?” (Mark 6:3). Even his disciples wondered who he was. When they were caught in a squall on the Sea of Galilee, they roused Jesus from his nap and he proceeded to stop the storm. The fearful disciples asked themselves, “*Who is this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41).

It’s not surprising then that Jesus questioned his disciples concerning the people’s opinions about him. But his question wasn’t merely a means of gauging popular opinion about him. There was a question behind the question. His initial question, “Who do people say I am?” led to the more important question – “Who do *you* say I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29), which compelled his disciples to come to terms with their ideas about this man that they were following. Jesus still asks this question of his followers, bidding each one of us to decide *who* he is because what we believe about Jesus impacts how we live for him. The connection between our beliefs about Christ and our commitment to him is central theme in this section of Mark’s Gospel.

So, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do *you* say I am?” and in stark contrast with inaccurate views of the general public (Mark 8:28), Peter made his grand confession, “You are the *Messiah*” (Mark 8:29). At first glance it appears that the lack of insight about Jesus had been overcome as Peter made a correct assessment of Jesus’ identity. But as the story moves on, we realize that this was not the case, Peter could not accept the full implications of Jesus’ messianic mission. Yet, Peter does correctly identify Jesus as the *Messiah* or the *Christ.* The word *Christ* or *Messiah* means the *anointed one.* The Hebrew word for *Messiah* is used throughout the Old Testament to describe someone chosen by God for a special purpose. During the time of Jesus this term took on a special meaning within Judaism to describe the One whom God would send to free Israel and establish God’s righteous rule on earth (Hurtado, *Mark,* p. 141). Peter’s confession displays an insightful recognition of Jesus’ true significance as God’s anointed one. After closely observing Jesus’ words and deeds, Peter rightly concluded that Jesus was the *Messiah* who was establishing about God’s rule.

Yet, within the first century environment *Messiah* was a loaded term, open to a lot of speculation and diverse expectations. This is likely the reason why Jesus instructed his disciples not to tell anyone about him (Mark 8:30). There was a real concern that if Peter’s confession became widely known then people would begin to attach all kinds of messianic expectationsto Jesus. Some might even get their swords ready, expecting him to lead a violent revolt and overthrow the Romans. A particular course of events needed to unfold before Jesus’ messianic identity could be fully revealed. Even Peter, whose insightful confession of Jesus marks a major turning point in the Gospel narrative, didn’t fully understand or accept the full scope of Jesus’ mission.

On the heels of Peter’s confession, Jesus foretells the heart-breaking events of holy week, Good Friday and Easter. After Jesus firmly warned his disciples to keep the messianic secret, he added a new wrinkle to his messianic mission:

“*It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive*” (Mark 8:31, *The Message*).

This passion prediction in Mark 8:31 is the first in a series of three such predictions in the Gospel (9:31; 10:33-34). All three predictions are very timely in light of Peter’s confession. They were intended to expand the disciples’ understanding of their Lord’s identity and mission.

Clearly, Peter understood what Jesus was saying because he immediately took him aside and scolded him for saying such things (Mark 8:32). Peter’s resistance to Jesus’ prediction was understandable because the idea that the Messiah would suffer was not what anyone would have expected. Most Jews were anticipating a Messiah who would establish a new reign of righteousness and peace. So, when Jesus predicted that the key leaders of the Jewish community, the elders, the high priests and the experts in religious law, would reject him, Peter viewed this as a major failure in Jesus’ mission. His conviction was that Jesus was the Messiah and that God was with him. A path of suffering, a guilty verdict by the Jewish Council and a *death sentence*, these things were not in the cards for God’s Messiah! Yet this was the very path that Jesus, God’s chosen one, needed to walk in order to complete his mission.

Jesus’ unshakeable commitment to God’s mission explains his harsh reaction to Peter’s words. Within an earshot of the other disciples Jesus issued a sharp rebuke of Peter, making it clear to all that he rejected any temptation to stray from his divinely ordained path (Mark 8:33). Peter’s suggestion that Jesus’ messianic mission needed to go in another direction was a genuine temptation, leading to Jesus’ stern reproof - “Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works” (Mark 8:33, *The Message*). Jesus knew that he would fulfill God’s mission through the shame of the cross, so any suggestion that he resist God’s plan was tantamount to a temptation from Satan.

The message is clear. A true confession of Jesus must give a primary place to the cross, his loving sacrifice for humanity.

**3. The Cost of Discipleship: “*Take up Your Cross”***

At the same time, our confession of Jesus must impact how we live our lives. If the cross is central to our belief about Jesus, then we too must be willing bear our crosses. What we believe about Jesus should have a direct connection to how we act within this congregation, within our families, within our neighbourhoods and within our world. While Peter and the others were shocked and surprised by Jesus’ prediction of a suffering and dying Messiah, they must have been even more distraught by his invitation to join him on this death march. I suspect that they were beginning to have a sinking feeling that things were not going to work out as expected. Their dreams of triumph and victory were destroyed by this talk of suffering and death. “He’s on the pathway to death,” his disciples must have thought, “and now he’s asking us to join him.” And yet a true disciple seeks to be like the Master and to walk on the same pathway. A little later in the Gospel, Jesus will challenge his disciples to serve others, declaring “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). If we want to be more like the Master, we too must be willing to serve others and to let go of our lives.

Right after Jesus rebuked Peter, he called out to the crowd and invited them to follow him, “*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me*” (8:34). Jesus’ words are clear, if any of us wants to follow him, to be one of his disciples, then, we must *deny ourselves.* Self- denial means that we must be willing to lose everything for the sake of following Jesus. Our rights, our status, our privileges, our possessions, even our very lives are given up for the sake of Christ. Biblical scholar, William Lane notes that “Jesus stipulated that those who wish to follow him must be prepared to shift the centre of gravity in their lives from a concern for self to reckless abandon to the will of God” (Lane, *Mark,* p. 307). Jesus’ call for self-denial is intensified by the horrifying image of the march to the cross. If any of you wants to follow Jesus, you must also *take up your cross*.

For us, the symbol of the cross is not as shocking or scandalous as it once was. Our sanctuary is adorned with a large cross. Many of us wear crosses around our necks. But this was not the case for the crowd who first heard these words. For them “taking up the cross” evoked an image of a condemned criminal carrying a crossbeam and marching to the place of execution. We tend to spiritualize the idea of “taking up the cross” with expressions like, “This is the cross that I bear.” But for the crowd who heard Jesus that day and for Mark’s first readers who read these words years later, the cross was a real and awful thing. The Romans frequently used crucifixion as a means of executing runaway slaves, criminals and revolutionaries. The original audience knew firsthand that it was a shameful and horrible way to die. Jesus’ appeal to take up the cross was an invitation to take the march to death. In the words of German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

Self-denial and cross bearing - not exactly what you signed up for when you decided to follow Jesus. Yet, this is Jesus’ call to each one of us and our response to his call will greatly impact how we conduct our lives in this world.

It will shape how we stand together as a congregation. When the church at Philippi was experiencing conflict among its key members (Philippians 4:2-3), Paul urged the Christians there to love one another and to work together, to be humble and be concerned for the needs of others (Philippians 2:2-4). In their life together, Paul exhorted them to imitate Christ:

“*Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion*” (Philippians 2:5-8, *The Message*).

What would our congregation look like if we truly had the attitude of Christ? As I ask this question, I recognize the hypocrisy in my own life. I know all too well how easy it is to get caught up in self-interest and self-importance; to allow ambition, aggression, selfishness and personal agendas to rule the day; to be bitter, judgmental and unforgiving towards my brothers and sisters. Deep down I know that there’s a better way, the way of Jesus. He set aside his rights, status and privileges and became a humble servant of everyone. How would it change our congregation if each one of us put our self-interest aside and served one another?

How would it change our world if we took up Jesus’ challenge and lived sacrificially? What would happen if we heeded Jesus’ call to radical discipleship and lived the way of the Master? For centuries the Church exerted its power over the world, but now Christians find themselves powerless and exiled within the larger society. We are strangers in a strange land. But the solution is not to try to get that power back again. We are called to serve, rather than grasp at power; to be humble, rather than dominate. Christians have a real opportunity to be like Jesus in the world, to deny the self, to take up the cross and to follow him. Are we willing to follow the Master on his journey to the cross? Jesus says to all of us, “*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me*.”