



## February 25, 2018 - Undivided Heart

Given by Rev. Mattei

*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. (Mk 8:31)*

We come this week to what is often called the central part of Mark's gospel account. It marks several important turning points in the story. Geographically, Jesus has been working mostly in the region of Galilee, but now his ministry will lead him steadily onward toward Jerusalem and the cross. Theologically several shifts also occur. Up to this point, Mark has focused on *who* Jesus is as shown by his words and his works of power. The conclusion he hopes that we, the hearers of the good news, will reach is the same one that Peter voices in Mark 8:29, namely that Jesus is the Anointed One (or in Hebrew the "Messiah" and in Greek the "Christ".)

But what does that mean? From here on out the gospel will focus more and more on this question. What does it *mean* that Jesus is the Christ, and, subsequently, how does that shape the lives of those who call themselves Christians? We are given the opportunity to reflect and progress from personal discovery and understanding to personal acceptance and faith to personal commitment and social engagement.

At this juncture of Jesus' life we hear the first of three "passion predictions" (here and then again in Mk. 9:30, 10:32-34), in which Jesus foretells what lies ahead (verse 31). Jesus is candid about the great suffering and rejection he **MUST** undergo by the hands of those in power: the elders, the scribes and the chief priests (i.e. those who were upset with what Jesus was doing and saying because their self-serving system they had set up was being exposed and challenged.) The "must" is not a masochistic and suicidal tendency of Jesus nor is it the unilateral and unmoving cruel decision of a Father who sacrifices his son for our salvation. It is the natural consequence of a radical decision to personally oppose and publicly expose evil: once on that path one necessarily ends up being hurt.

In this instance just like in the next two, those closest to Jesus fail to understand what he is talking about. Peter pulls Jesus aside, as if Jesus were the candidate and Peter the campaign manager, and he begins to rebuke Jesus for saying such things. Jesus is not saying the popular promises one would expect. On the contrary, he risks alienation and persecution. Peter wants to protect Jesus from harm but he ends up attempting to muzzle him just as those who are comfortable or afraid within and without the Church try to silence the prophetic voice of the gospel.

Jesus puts Peter in his place. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” And here is the essence of the matter, it is not the disciple’s place to define what “Messiah” means, for it is Jesus alone who gets to define it. The disciple’s place is simply to get behind Jesus, to take up her or his cross, and to follow.

Finally, what does it mean to take up one’s cross? Is it simply to deal with the problems or troubles that come our way with as much patience, determination, and faith as possible? We often hear of “bearing our cross” in terms of just such perseverance. Yet Jesus has something else, something deeper in mind than getting through life as best as we can. After all, the cross that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem is a direct result of his own work to confront the powers of sin, evil, and death. He lived fully immersed in the reality of his time and place. He exposed the gods of affluence, possession and greed to which those in a more economically advantaged class had committed in addictive and radical ways (see Jesus’ condemnation of the “adulterous and sinful generation” in Mk 8:38). Those gods had their own kingdom sustained by the misery and hardship of the vast majority of the people. Jesus loved God with undivided heart, mind and energy and no other human made god would interfere with that relationship.

When a nation is faced with an increase in death by overdose<sup>1</sup> or by gun violence<sup>2</sup> or with the highest number of incarcerated people in the world<sup>3</sup> or with the rise of white supremacy and hate crime<sup>4</sup> then one knows that there are powers and principalities<sup>5</sup> at play to which people have bowed and embraced, other gods that lure us into submission and prostitution. Ours is an adulterous and sinful generation, too.

But the gospel of Jesus demands a disciple’s attention and loyalty. It demands a sharp and unbiased analysis of reality and a radical commitment not to the party of our choice;

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<sup>1</sup> More than 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016, nearly double in a decade: see <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/us-gun-violence\\_us\\_560d9635e4b0af3706e00e20](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/us-gun-violence_us_560d9635e4b0af3706e00e20)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2012/us-incarceration.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://blackamericaweb.com/2018/01/19/racist-violence-white-supremacy-violence-crimes-soar>

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 6:12

not even to the nation but to the supreme authority of God. In following him, we discover who we truly are. "Taking up the cross means being at work where God is at work [...] to relieve suffering and injustice, to rescue the weak, and to bring peace and justice to bear in the human community."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus defined "Messiah" in terms of his identification with the outcasts, the forgotten, and the oppressed, bringing to them in word and deed the promise of God's coming kingdom. This has important implications for all who would be his disciples. Because God has gifted each of us with a unique set of gifts, talents, abilities, and experiences, each of us has a unique opportunity to take up our cross and participate in God's redemptive work in the world. Are we willing to make our voice heard? Are we ready to stand up for those who are victimized? Sometimes it is just a matter of picking up our phone and calling the people we voted in political leadership and make our voice heard. Sometimes it may mean making sure that people and institutions that discriminate are exposed and the truth made available. Sometimes it may mean economically supporting organizations that investigate and prosecute abusers and violators. And sometimes it may mean simply encouraging one another to openly reject easy prejudices and stereotypes.

Jesus said: "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." (Mark 8:35) May God bless us to know the difference and to choose to be free.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 2007), 288.