Identifying and Following the Messiah: Mark 8:27-38

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Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, '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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' (NRSV)

Peter's is a moment of clarity. Briefly the clouds part and he speaks from the heart: "You are the Messiah." Peter has taken some years to arrive at this conclusion. It is the *discovery* of one who has followed, asked, watched, and questioned.

But as our story unfolds we realise Peter knows almost *nothing* about the *implications* of his declaration. He is on a journey but has not arrived. Peter speaks a seed of truth without knowing how, when, or where it will grow.

Jesus' identity was widely debated. In our passage the disciple's summarise a guessing world: John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet of old. The strange – almost creepy - list reveals Israel's struggle to cram all they see and hear into their constantly breaking boxes. Jesus casts minds back to one recently murdered and to legends of old. Perhaps all they really know is that this one is *very* different.

But no one has a clue just how different this Jesus really is.

It will be quite a process to put flesh on Peter's bare-bones insight. For the disciples the declaration implies political freedom, armies, war, riches, and power. God's Messiah will come and set Israel free from the clenched fist of Rome. What other way to achieve this than with an even greater show of force? We will soon read the disciple's argument over who is the greatest; a little later there will be a request for positions on Jesus' right and left. They are imagining a king and a court with multiple thrones.

So Jesus begins the monumental task of redefining their expectations. He speaks plainly of his coming suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Upon hearing these words Peter offers a quiet word of correction. After all, no one will follow into battle if Jesus continues to talk like this. They *expect* blood to be shed - but it has not even occurred to them that it will be Jesus' own.

Over the next couple of chapters Jesus speaks this way three times (Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34). To be sure, his words are plain and clear, but (apart from Peter's private rebuke) the disciples essentially have *nothing* to say. Our author offers a word of explanation: "…they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask…" (Mark 9:32).

Essentially the disciples feel the paradigm shifting - so much so that they cannot even put it into words. This is a foreign, strange, and completely unexpected path to victory. In fact it looks much more like defeat than anything else. They hear the words but they simply have no categories for a king who sets his kingdom free through his *own* suffering.

And it *is* so unexpected. The whole world – as the disciples (and everyone else) see it - operates from a firmly set paradigm that has no room for such an act. Jesus must slowly open a space in which to reveal God's suffering heart that lies at the core of all that is. In a world that sees Rome and Caesar as centre this will be a seismic shift indeed. It is a precious, if not slow, process to watch.

But over the remainder of this gospel these men will gradually come to see that God's way is more radical than they ever dared to dream.

Jesus concludes his private conversation with the disciples and turns, while they still listen, to all who would dare to hear. This address is not for an elite few. It is an open invitation to all who will listen and respond.

At its core there is nothing new. Jesus still speaks in terms of *following* and *saving*. But even his open kingdom-of-God sketch is now incorporating unexpected, darker shades. He speaks of *denial*, *loss,* and a *cross*. Such terms just don't juggle into catchy campaign slogans. He deserves points for honesty and clarity but probably not for much more. With such phrases he will struggle to summon an army.

But this is the Jesus way. The logic employed reveals that Jesus believes this following-through-the-cross is a good and wise option for citizens of this God kingdom. His questions ask his listeners to consider for themselves: Where is the profit in gaining the world but forfeiting *life*? What would you trade in for *life*? Of course, they are good questions. They presume the answer that life is not something to deal in lightly. Jesus, via suffering and death, is offering life.

On the other hand his questions sit awkwardly in the context of Jesus' urging people to adopt the way of the *cross*. When Jesus preached this sermon the cross was not a religious symbol. It implied Roman oppression, unbearable suffering, the permanence

and decay of death. It reminded no one of love, sacrifice, eternal life, and the victory of God. It was simply a tried and tested symbol of fear.

Jesus really is taking a risk. It is one thing to redefine the expectations of a Messiah but now he is casting the role of his subjects in the same light: it is not simply Jesus who will suffer. He is asking the willing to come right along with him. He is pointing to the symbol of death and saying that this is the way to life.

And then there's all that talk of being ashamed. I wonder if Jesus responds here to some kind of mood change in the crowd. Perhaps he sees the shifting eyes, hear whispers of insanity, sees trusted friends turn their backs. It really would not be so surprising.

After Jesus finishes his speech there is a silent period for six days (Mark 9:2). Could it be that we see here a chronic indigestion as people chew over, swallow, and digest Jesus words? I don't know if this is the intention of our author. But perhaps all who take these words seriously need also fall into a similar, weighty consideration. They ask a lot of us.

When I think of the elaborate, decorated crosses of the church past and present or of the legendary world walk that took Arthur Blessitt and his 10 foot home-made cross to 321 countries over 44 years, I confess to have some sympathy with those who think we have lost the rawness of the cross. Ultimately, however, I see these acts and works of art as surprising celebrations of life springing from the weapon of death. It is quite a turn around. In Jesus' hands the cross has been – and continues to be – redefined as a source of grace, forgiveness and of life conquering death.

Jesus opened a redefining, life-giving space and filled it with himself. But like Peter we follow this narrow, well trodden way of the cross even though we do not yet fully understand. Here is a space where you and I can safely both *lose* and *find* our true selves.

Amen