

St Marc Grenoble
Sunday 12th September 2021 (Trinity 15)
James 3: 1 - 12
Mark 8: 27 - 38
Messiah and Faith

Good Morning and Welcome

Pray

Our reading in Mark's Gospel this morning is something of a 'landmark' reading, which my favourite New Testament commentator, Tom Wright, describes as the 'centre point', or the 'turning point' of Mark's Gospel.

From this time onwards, Jesus began heading both spiritually, and physically, towards Jerusalem, and the earth shattering things to take place there.

There had been a series of remarkable healing miracles, in the area around the Sea of Galilee, all clearly demonstrating Jesus' amazing Godly power. Concluding with the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida.

This healing occasion was different: in the first attempt at healing, it appears to have provided only partial vision. - When Jesus asked him, the man said - peering around 'I can see people, but they look like trees walking about'.

Then, we're told Jesus laid hands on him again. This time we're told, he looked hard, and his sight came back - he could see everything clearly'. Jesus sent the man home, telling him not to even go into the village.

Some scholars suggest it happened this way, so that Jesus could prove he was able to cure people who were totally blind - not just those with eye diseases or irritation.

Others suggest that the story reflects His preparation for the healing of the disciples, who would need more than just 'simple' healing in order to cure their inner blindness - their inability to understand what Jesus was teaching them, in the story we're about to explore.

Then, we're told: Jesus and His disciples 'came' to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. By the way, this wasn't just a casual afternoon stroll. It was a very

long way. Even in a car, on modern roads, it takes a couple of hours, so on foot it was probably a good two days' journey.

Caesarea Philippi is away up North, in the Tetrarchy of Philip, close to the source of the River Jordan, on the slopes of Mount Hermon (see the map!); from where - on a clear day, you can see all the way down the Jordan Valley towards Jerusalem.

Today, Caesarea Philippi is an area of springs and grottoes, which has a sort of ghostly feeling about it; but, in its day, it was apparently a peculiarly interesting place; it was built by King Herod Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great, as the capital of his tetrarchy - one of the puppet states of Rome.

Apparently, it had a temple, which was once described to me as being something like a religious theme park: dedicated to a new and very particular god ... I wonder if anyone knows which one???

(Yes) It was the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus himself – who wanted the people of the Roman Empire to worship him alone as god.
(I wonder why various 21C presidents around the world sprang to mind as I was writing this.)

On the way there, Jesus asked his disciples; “Who are people saying that I am?” Their response was: “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and yet others say one of the prophets”.

Then Jesus popped the \$64,000 question! - “But,” said Jesus “What about you? Who do you say I am???”

Peter jumped in straight away, speaking for them all – on this occasion using his tongue, which often got him into trouble, to great, positive effect: “You are the Messiah” he said.

That was an extremely bold, politically charged and theologically very risky statement, which in those days would have suggested that Jesus is the true king of Israel – the one whom the Jews had been waiting for, for hundreds of years. The one, the Jews believed, who would be coming to restore kingship to the ‘Royal line’ of David

So, Jesus being declared ‘Messiah’ was not only a major, populist challenge to Herod – the highly unpopular ‘puppet king’, but, far more seriously, an extremely dangerous challenge, directly to the Emperor, Caesar, in Rome.

Which may well be why Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone else? If it was heard by the wrong people, that statement would have been regarded

as treason and all their lives would have been on the line.

Certainly, it provided the context for Jesus to start explaining to His disciples what the imminent future was going to mean for Him.

In v.31 we're told: 'He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering – and rejection – and death ... and then, after three days rise again.'

That's no real surprise for us, with the wonderful benefit of hindsight; but, for His disciples at the time, this was totally shocking; definitely not good news.

Incidentally, we're told 'He said all this quite openly'; and yet, it is almost as if they were not hearing Him, because they were all totally flabbergasted, when – just a little later, it actually happened as he had foretold, yet they just seemed totally unprepared for it.

Peter's tongue swung into action again! (the tongue is like a forest fire!) We're told "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him."

But, turning and looking at His disciples, we're told Jesus in turn rebuked Peter and said: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

There's a real warning here for us too. How often do we try and plan things we want, for God's blessing, rather than being open to God's plan for us?

At this point Jesus called the crowd to Him, with His disciples and 'laid it on the line', saying: 'If any of you want to come the way I'm going,' he said, 'you must say "no" to your own selves, pick up your cross, and follow me.

Yes: if you want to save your life, you'll lose it; but if you lose your life because of me and the Message you'll save it. After all, what use is it to win the world and lose your life? What can you give in exchange for your life?

If you're ashamed of me and my words in this cheating and sinning generation, the son of man will be ashamed of you when he "comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels". For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Those 21st C power crazed Presidents and politicians spring to mind again ...

I've preached on this passage a number of times during my 20+ years of Christian ministry; but I've never before noticed the depth of contrast between the selfish behaviour and demeanour of earthly kings and rulers, compared with the innate heavenly power and yet the overwhelming humility of our

Messiah, our King, Jesus.

(That's one of the joys of getting up to your wellies in the Bible, because I find we constantly learn new things about Jesus, and what the scriptures teach us about Him.)

Jesus concluded this discourse: "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.

I don't know about you; but this story is extremely challenging, for me, and a cause of salutary reflection on my whole Christian life ...

A number of times recently, I've said that becoming a Christian does not mean you will have a totally easy life ahead. But, as the apostle Paul demonstrated - you can be beset by human challenges, aggression, hostility, even derision, and yet still be totally fulfilled in serving Jesus.

This Gospel reading makes it perfectly clear that, like Jesus, we may well meet crucial, and agonising times, as we seek to serve Him; but He will always be there to support and guide us.

I hope the Gospel reading this morning has challenged you; and truly given you something to reflect on, and pray about, in the week ahead.

We have been redeemed by a wonderful Messiah, and we should continue to serve Him as our heavenly King, come what may ...

Let's PRAY