

Sermon Archive 189

Sunday 25 February, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 8: 31-38

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In Mark's gospel, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection three times. It's interesting to watch how the disciples' reactions evolve over the three. On the first occasion, Peter argues with it, says that it must never happen. And for his resistance, he gets a rebuke. On the second occasion, Jesus repeats himself, pretty much word for word. This time, we're told that the disciples say nothing, because they don't understand and are afraid to ask. On the third foretelling, two disciples, for the first time seem to have heard the resurrection part, but they've clearly still not got the first idea of what it means; they think it's about getting seats of honour.

Through these multiple fore-tellings, Mark presents a story of human beings trying to understand what Jesus is about. He has the human beings gradually evolving in their understanding of carrying the cross, but being largely mired in unknowing. Jesus says "Peter, Peter; your mind's not on divine things, but on human things."

So let's explore where Peter is.

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I like Peter. I've always liked him, because he's the one in the gospels who kind of speaks for humanity as we try to work out who this beguiling, but strange person Jesus is. Peter tends to be the one who makes the first guess, who takes the first step across the waves, who has a go (generally a deeply flawed go) at trying to articulate what he's seeing in Jesus. That he so often fails, only makes him more endearing to me. Peter-have-a-go. Peter-the-foot-in-the-mouth - as Jesus says, "Peter, you're struggling with divine things, because your mind is human". As I am human. As you are human. We all come to this Jesus figure as human.

So four thoughts, today, about being human.

Humans love. And in love, they want to protect. Although this first foretelling of death comes half way through Mark's *written* gospel, it's well beyond half way in chronological terms of the three years of Jesus' ministry. It's happening just

before Jesus goes to Jerusalem. So Jesus and Peter have been keeping close company for a long time now. They've dined together. They've walked together, talked together, healed together, grieved together. They've been chased out of town together. Of course they're close. Human beings get close to one another. And when they **do**, they want to protect one another. One parent of a Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student in Florida this week was heard to say "I sent him to school. It was my job to protect him". When you love, you want to protect. So, of course, when a threat raises its head, you resist it. The resisting is an expression of love, and love is human. Jesus rightly says, as Peter resists the threat, that his mind (and obviously his heart) are showing him, totally to have his focus on human things - the human things of love. Irrational favour. Incomprehensible commitment. Why would **that** one care for **that** one? I just can't see it. And yet this creature, full of the impulse to survive, will throw itself under the bus wheels for the careless, absent-minded, traffic-ill-aware other. It might not make sense, but if you're dealing with humans, you're dealing with protection and love. Peter, Peter, your mind's on human things.

What else do humans do? They build life. They try to build for themselves a world. I remember, some years into my time in Sydney, on some anniversary of my having arrived there knowing no one, gathering a group of friends for lunch at the New South Wales Leagues Club. After a round of pub food, steak and chips or the like, I made a little speech. It went something along the lines of "I am grateful for the life that I have built here. I am grateful to you all for being part of it." I remember being aware, that day, that I had come a long way from not knowing where to find anything in the city, from not knowing about Medicare, about the RTA, the ATO, the ICAC and a million other acronyms - to a place of lessened general confusion. I remember also feeling that I had come from being a stranger among strangers, to being part of a community. I had friends. I had a life. I had constructed a world to live in and to be happy in. So among friends, I toasted my new Australian life. We seek life. We build worlds. We give ourselves to making a home. I want to seek life. I want to find life. I want to build life. I want to hold on to life. I make for myself a world.

Should Jesus see Peter building a world, seeking life, should he see him cherishing, valuing, hoping for the prosperity and longevity of what he builds, then he might say "Peter, Peter, your mind is on human things. Those who seek life, lose it; and those who give it away, find it." Weird; I'll have to think that through.

What else do humans do? They notice when something's wrong, and they want

to fix it. They see when something is a problem, and they want to solve it. Maybe Peter's noticed that Romans have invaded his world. That's a problem. Maybe he's noticed that Israel has lost pride. That's just wrong. So what does the human being do? The human being seeks a solution. And the most obvious, direct solution, I guess, is to find someone who can stand up to the Romans. The problem came in the form of assertion, usurpation, and theft. So the first human solution is a mirroring of it: a counter-assertion, a second usurping, a stealing back of what was stolen. The power of Rome is to be met by the power of Jesus. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth - a solution is sought by the human.

So should Jesus find a human being caring about injustice, but bringing only the dull instruments of obvious, direct power-play to the engagement, if Jesus sees a human being with the right instinct but not attending to the deep matters beneath the problem (the human condition – the warring within – school teachers given guns, rather than working out why people carry guns in the first place), he well might say “Peter, Peter; your mind is on human things”.

The last human thing! Jesus speaks to Peter about dying **and** rising. He speaks to him about death **and** resurrection. But Peter doesn't say to Jesus “what do you mean by resurrection?” He focuses immediately only on the death. The death becomes the focus of his whole response. It's as if he hasn't even heard the word about rising. On the second foretelling, resurrection's mentioned again, but the disciples are said not to understand it. On the third telling, it's mentioned again, and while some of the disciples are beginning to notice, their request for glory means they still really have no idea. For the disciples on the third attempt, and for Peter now, they have no point of reference for “rising again”. They know about death. Yes, they can hear, can understand, the references to violence and sorrow. Yes, they can hear and decode the story of tragedy and injustice. Yes, they're well familiar with the vocabulary of defeat - but resurrection is so unfamiliar that they don't even seem to be able to hear it.

Human beings listen for the mysteries of God, from within a deep and deafening experience of how things tragically are. When Jesus sees the human being not hearing the words “rise again”, he well might say “Peter, Peter; your mind is on human things”.

And so, to the rebuke.

Peter, when you love, you are human. When you want to protect someone, you are human. The truth is that you can't always protect those you love. And when you can't, you may feel that you have failed in your humanity. I rebuke that. I say to you that you are to love your neighbour as yourself. I say to you that love wins. And in hearing that, your mind is going to divine things.

Peter, when you build a life, create a world to live in, when you toast the world that you and your friends have made, you are human. The truth is that sometimes the worlds we build fall to pieces. And when they do, you may find yourself feeling that you have failed in your humanity. I rebuke that. I say to you that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it. In carrying that loss, in letting go, your mind is going to divine things.

Peter, when you notice a problem, and you bring the world's most obvious, power-worshipping solutions to it, you are being human. You may feel that when you've used your power and lost, or even used your power and won (troubled conscience), you've failed in your humanity. I say to you that there is a deeper way to meet the powers. There is a more disarming approach to take to the arrogant. Carry your cross; erect it in full view; insist that the powers see what power does to God, and let it shame them. If you carry your cross like that, your mind is going to divine things.

And Peter, when you are so totally a product of the empirical, when your ears have become so used to the tragic, that they're deaf to words like "rise again", you're being human. You **have** no point of reference yet for the mysteries that I unfold. But to you I say, prepare yourself to hear of resurrection. I will speak to you of this again. One time, two times, three times. In love and patience, I will speak until you hear. And when you hear, your mind will be going to divine things.

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And so, people of Knox, through multiple foretellings, Mark presents a story of human beings trying to understand what Jesus is about. Jesus speaks about death. He speaks about resurrection. He calls us to follow him.

On our Lenten journey, we keep a moment of quiet.

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