

## Sermon Archive 332

Sunday 28 February, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 8: 31-38

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Jesus is about to float the idea that some people, soon, might be ashamed of him. Why would anyone be ashamed of him? Is it perhaps because he lost the argument with the authorities? (Political failure - do not speak of it, consign it to history or the backbenches.) Or is it perhaps because he was convicted of a crime? (The court case, the sentencing - never speak of that, rather lock it away.) Or maybe it's because he suffered, became a broken person, became a victim to something bigger. (Don't dwell on the illness, the addiction, the suicide, the plain fact of the pain, the imposed public display of his nakedness on the cross, no hand free to cover his genitals.)

We might get angry about all of that (where is your God? How could people do that?) Or we might want to step away from it, because we feel ashamed, and even ashamed of feeling ashamed. Jesus is about to float the idea that some people might be ashamed of him. He's also about to "have a go" at Peter for the way he's thinking. The Lenten journey is developing some edges that are sharp.

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As Peter listens, I want to say "carefully", but I'm not sure I **can** say "carefully", Jesus describes a certain state of affairs. The state is that he (Jesus) is to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the authorities, be killed, and three days later rise again. Jesus doesn't whisper it, as if in the spirit of "do not speak of this", but announces it quite openly.

Peter, as we know, reacts negatively, urges Jesus not to embrace it, but to find a different way, and in rush the preachers and pop-psychologists to probe Peter's motives.

One motive, of course, could be the simple one of wanting to keep a friend from pain. Who wants suffering for one you love? It's love, wanting to preserve, to protect the

beloved, that grounds Peter's resistance. How does that seem for a motivation? Is **that** the kind of thing that Jesus is likely to rebuke with the vocab of anger and references to "Satan". Is Jesus likely to savage the ear of someone simply acting out of care? And the fact that Jesus quickly segues into talk about "being ashamed", makes me wonder if Jesus is detecting something concerning Peter other than love. Does Peter's reaction reveal something about shame?

I once decided to follow someone. I left my perfectly good business behind to do the following. My family are now having to fend for themselves, and people watching from a distance are saying that I'm an idiot. I've put myself on the line for this "following". And that's OK, because sometimes it's a bit of pain for a longer term gain - a momentary defeat for the sake of a greater victory. You know how it goes.

But how does it go if the One I'm following then begins to lose. He becomes a victim - a victim to the system, a victim to pain, a victim to the rash decisions he's made. Not only do I not want that for him (there must be vestiges of love there), but neither do I want that for myself. I don't want to be the one who followed the failure. Does suffering indicate failure? Not always, but if the sufferings kind of self-inflicted, then something's clearly gone wrong - failed . . . It's just fodder for the sneering and jeering of those who already think I've made a dumb decision. It's ammunition for those who already pity my family. It's adulterous and sinful, shameful, the way it's working out.

So it needs to be resisted. Jesus needs to consider a different aspiration. "Aspiration"? It's hardly an aspiration to fail! It's aspiration to succeed. It's even aspiration to survive - when things are as basic as surviving. "I'm a survivor!" You can say that with **pride**. Jesus just needs to view things through the lens if not of caution, then at least of careful, strategic self-preservation. Maybe that's what Peter means to say.

And this is where Jesus refuses advice to think differently. He tells Peter that **he** needs to think differently. He needs to think differently because he's thinking within a frame of human things, not within a frame of Godly things. Peter needs to start thinking like God.

Here's a wee critique of one way of thinking. The thinking is that of self-preservation. The **goal** is self-preservation. If compromises are to be made along the way, trade-offs along the way, then they're to be set, struck, reckoned, towards the ultimate goal of self-preservation. I have in mind a certain one-time leader of a country. On a regular basis, daily, to preserve his hold on power, he would sacrifice the truth. Truth was not as important as self-preservation. And when a democratic process removed him from office, phone calls were made, people were leaned on, court time was wasted, because the constitution, just like truth, was less important than self-preservation. It was perhaps foreshadowed years before, when he said he was smart (bordering on stable genius) to not pay tax. (Preserving private wealth is more important than social responsibility, social contract - supporting the infrastructure of the other.) And now, he still resists handing over his tax returns. Is there perhaps something within those returns that is shameful? It's important to preserve self. It's important to not let others get in our way. It's important to win, to be untouchable . . . until Jesus rebukes all that, and calls it "Satan". The one-time leader is an extreme example, but a real one. We need to think in a way that's not purely self-preserving.

Here's an equally wee critique of another way of thinking. It is the thinking of sacrifice and hope. Its dynamic is that of "care for the other". The dynamic is honesty about the place of suffering in human experience. The dynamic is that of looking among the things that happen to us, for the promise of that "third day rising". Sacrifice and hope.

I have in mind someone who had the option of being a carpenter, like his father was a carpenter; who had a secure life cut out in a small town; income, friends, family - but who was burdened by this "love your God and love your neighbour" thing - this intractable sense, home-dislodging sense of calling to bless the other. It was a "going out into the world with good news for the good of the other". It'd cause him at one point to say "foxes have their holes, and birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head". For him, it was never about him, or his security. Before the extremes of the end of his life, there were decisions after decisions made, preferring consideration of the other. And when the weight of those decisions began to produce resistance, rejection, violent response from the

"machine", there was no sense of panic or surprise - just a sense that suffering is part of the human experience - as is the hope of the coming of the third day. This thinking is real about suffering, and it's hopeful about hope. And of this thinking, this way of living, there is nothing about which to be ashamed. Jesus will suffer - but not be ashamed. This is how God thinks, and how Jesus challenges Peter to think. I wonder how we will think.

There was a nun, Helen McCabe, based in Sydney during the 1980s, serving at St Vincent's Hospital, in the newly established AIDS ward. Interviewed for the documentary, Rampant, she said: *Some people said to me "I'm being punished, I'm being punished. Which was particularly difficult for them. It's bad enough to be so ill, let alone to feel that it's some kind of punishment.*

In the same documentary, Basil Donovan, a doctor at the Taylor Square Clinic said *"for some who had been estranged from their families, it brought them back together with their families . . . I've just thought of a woman who, the rest of her family wouldn't talk to her brother, so she came down from a country town, left her five kids in the care of her husband. She lived with her brother and looked after him until he died - with no support from the family. And you just go "you bastards". You know, based entirely on prejudice.*

That's what Helen and Basil said. I wonder what we think.

There is a difference between suffering and shame. Jesus suffers; Peter can't change that. Jesus asks him not to try. But he asks also that nobody be ashamed. When thinking in the way of God, when living with love for the other, when sifting through human experience for third-day hope, Jesus says "don't be ashamed". There is nothing in such a living, such a thinking, of which to be ashamed.

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So we, with Peter, are listening. Holy Week and Good Friday are coming. Is there a lens of sacrifice and hope, through which we're called to view our world?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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