

Mark 8:31-38

I was on a train when my father died. He had been so ill for so long and then, suddenly, he took a tilt at dying and left us much faster than we expected. I had been giving a lecture in London and I was on my way home, just this side of Reading station when he died. One call told me to get there to his bedside as fast as I could. Another, twenty minutes later, told me he had died. There was nothing I could do to get there more quickly. There was nothing I could do to make the situation better. The train felt like a prison cell. I was powerless.

There is quite a lot of powerlessness surrounding a death. You simply cannot stop it happening. There is a lot you try to do, you rush around a good deal, but the truth is that when someone is dying and dying - over several weeks - there is an awful lot of simply sitting with that. My mother spent hours just sitting with my father. That was the right thing to do, absolutely the right thing to do; but when you are someone like me, and you are hard wired to take responsibility; it is very hard to be powerless. And when you think that it might be your responsibility to make the situation better, it is very hard to sit with a situation that is not going to get better.

So I want to say something about being in control this morning and I will use the gospel reading to help me. It was St Mark, in truth a very important part of St Mark. The first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel are:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

Mark 1:15

In Mark's Gospel Jesus bursts on the scene. There is the briefest of introductions and then heaven is torn open at the baptism – that's what the gospel says, *heaven is torn open*. It is urgent and Mark is interested in telling the time. *The time is fulfilled*, he says. Prophecy, that voice crying in the wilderness announced it, and now the time is fulfilled.

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Mark 1:15

Repent – *metanoein* – it means 'change your mind', but it is stronger than that, it means 'turn round', 'go back again'. That's how Jesus begins his preaching. These are the first words we hear. The Kingdom has come and we must think again, turn round, face the other way. *Repent*, it is what this morning's gospel reading was all about.

Jesus and the disciples are in Caesarea Philippi. That is important, they have just been in Tyre, and that was full of pagans; now they are re-entering the Holy Land, they stand quite literally on the borders of God's Kingdom. On one side of them are people who do *not* know the story of God's promises, on the other side people who do. It is there that Jesus asked a question; 'Who do people say that I am?' We did

not hear that this morning, but just before our reading Jesus asks 'Who do people say that I am?'

Now, Mark is really interested in the answer to that question, the 'Who is Jesus?' question. He has already spent a lot of time telling us that there are people who want Jesus dead, there are crowds who clamour for miracles, there is Herod who fears him, there are demons who know him and obey him, and there people like the disciples who are fascinated and bewildered by him. Over and over again, the early chapters of Mark ask 'Who is Jesus?' and offer us all kinds of answers. So, when Jesus turns to the disciples and says, 'Who do people say that I am?' they looked at their feet, at one another, at the sky; they kicked the sand with their shoes and whistled little tunes. They are evasive,

They answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Mark 8:28

Jesus asks them again: 'But, who do you say that I am?' The same question because the first answer missed the point. Repent, think again.

Then Peter speaks, and he answers in words we have not yet heard in this gospel. When Peter speaks it is like lightning in a summer sky, "You are the Christ." That is what we have been longing to hear. At last, it has been said, he has been acknowledged.

And then... the strangest thing. Then, the startling words with which we began:

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.

Mark 8:31

You are the Christ. Repent, think again.

Peter has just identified Jesus as the *Messiah*. You are *the Christ*, it is a technical term. Peter looks for a Messiah, the one who will restore the Kingdom to Israel, the one who will drive out the Romans, replace the king, reform the Temple and inaugurate a new type of justice and a new society. He has clear expectations

He knows what he wants Jesus to be, and instantly he is made to think again.

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.

Think again. Jesus turns expectation on its head. This Son of Man, (and that is a tricky elusive phrase, what does Son of Man mean? Jesus uses it to make you pause and wonder). This Son of Man, Jesus, will not have a throne and he will not have servants. He will suffer and he will die. Think again. That is what the gospel reading is all about. It picks up a fundamental theme of Mark's gospel, the idea that when the Kingdom comes it, it will be surprising. The Messiah will not be the victor but the

victim, he will not slay he will be slain. The Messiah will not be powerful he will be powerless.

This passage is a hinge in the gospel. We spend time wondering who Jesus is and then we come to this point and we know he is the Christ and begin to think about what that really means. From this point on in the gospel the shadow of the cross falls across every verse.

Repent, think again and do not ever think that you have Jesus tame, tidied and taped. *Repent*, think again and do not look for Christ amongst the cheering crowds or in the corridors of power. He is not at the top of the tree, he is nailed to it. It is the lesson drummed into the disciples the lesson we still have to learn and go on learning. And that matter.

It matters because we still, too often, much too often, speak as though with a bit more effort and a bit more focus we will fix things. We do that as a church and a community. We are full of solutions for the mission of the cathedral, the strategy of the diocese, for the problems of South Bristol or East Bristol, or for education or food poverty in Bristol; we are full of solutions for the environment, the economy or immigration. So we should be, of course, these things are important and demand our best efforts, but our solutions are too often another imposition, another exercise in power another moment when he does something to her, or we do something to them. It is just not the gospel. Jesus did not do that. He did not sort it out, he died. We must keep eyes and ears open to the voice we can hardly hear, the presence we neglect, the slow, sorry steps to Golgotha as we impose ourselves and believe the only answer is power.

Which brings me back to where I began and what this means, more personally. We need to notice that we are people who like solutions and want to fix things. And while we are busy doing that Jesus shoulders the cross again.

Now this is dense and difficult stuff. I am *not* saying that Christianity is all about giving up and just saying your prayers. It would be lovely to tell you that my father did not want me to fix it, that he just wanted me to love him. It would be lovely to suggest that that is the gospel, an uncomplicated love in place of all the solutions. It would be lovely, but wrong. My father did want me to fix it. My wife fixed lots of things that made a difference and my father died I think wishing that I could stop that happening.

We have to try; we have to commit to the world as it is. Jesus did that. He healed the sick, urged us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Injustice is all around and we should be ashamed and angry and committed.

But... but... we must always *repent*, we must forever think again. Mark's gospel sets before us a fundamentally important truth. We do not approach the Kingdom rehearsing clever arguments or listing a catalogue of our good deeds. The invitation is not to be clever, not to be good, not to be decisive. The invitation is to be sorry. Repent and believe. Rectitude in all its bright, brave forms will not save us; our calling is to be a community of common repentance.

So, talking to myself, I have to accept that part of my vocation, part of the common human vocation is to suffer loss, not prevent it. God in his grace and glory holds the beginning and end of a story that I will feel is incomplete, broken, turning out wrong. If I believe, if I truly believe I have to trust God, commit myself to his purposes and not my own. I have to loosen my clenched fingers and accept that my part this time at least is to do the thing I find hardest, to suffer and to cry.