

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 19 October 2003 6:30pm

MARK 8 v 27 - ch 9 v1

Mark 8:27-9:1

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" [28] They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

[29] "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ." [30] Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. [31] He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. [32] He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

[34] Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [35] For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. [36] What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? [37] Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? [38] If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." [9:1] And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

I want to start this evening's study by looking at the last verse in the passage first [9:1] And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

This is one of those mysterious and intriguing stand-alone verses - the sort that's guaranteed to keep a mid-week Bible-study going for a good couple of hours! I thought we'd look at it first, in a sense to get it out of the way. Interesting though it is, I feel that on this occasion it might distract from what I believe is God's message for us this evening.

I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.

The same sentence appears in the parallel passages in Matthew 16:28 and Luke 9:27.

Several interpretations have been suggested for the meaning of **the kingdom of God come with power**:

(a) Jesus' transfiguration - that episode where Jesus appears in a glorified state with Elijah and Moses on top of a high mountain,

- (b) Jesus' resurrection and Ascension,
- (c) the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the spread of Christianity by the early church,
- (d) the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70, and
- (e) Jesus' second coming.

All of those explanations have some credibility and it may be that it was Jesus' intention not be specific about exactly which event he meant. More than likely he was saying that many of those around him would see various signs of the coming of the kingdom within their lifetimes. As Christians, we get a bit -pre-programmed into thinking that any mention of the coming of the kingdom of God with power MUST refer to the second Coming. Of all the interpretations of this verse, however, I think that the Second Coming is the least likely. Given the fact that the second coming has not happened yet - it would mean that some of those people to whom Jesus spoke are still alive ... wandering the earth in bodies more than 2000 years old!

I think the most reasonable interpretation is that Jesus was referring to the Transfiguration. And there are two reasons for thinking that:

One is the specific time reference in Mark 9 v2. The transfiguration happened just about a week after Jesus spoke those words.

Secondly, there is a reference back to the Transfiguration from - guess who - Peter... in 2 *Peter 1:16-18*

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. [17] For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." [18] We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

It certainly seems from that passage that Peter identifies the episode of the Transfiguration as a fulfilment of what Jesus meant about him coming in power and as a foretaste, perhaps, of a future coming in even more power and glory.

So, that's the last verse in the passage dealt with. Intriguing though Jesus' statement was, I hope we can leave it there and concentrate on what the Lord would teach us here and now this evening. So - back to the start of the passage ..

"Who do people say I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" Jesus asks. "Who do you say I am?"

One of my favourite TV programmes, when I was a kid, was *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. For me, of course, that goes back to the days of black & white television in the 1960s when the character of Robin Hood was played by Richard Greene. Since then there have been a number of re-makes of the Robin Hood stories and I'm sure there's no-one here who doesn't remember the stories of Robin and his Merry Men, riding through Sherwood Forest, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Some of the more modern re-makes of the story seem to

concentrate rather too much on the love affair between Robin and the posh tart known as Maid Marian - and I think that misses the point somehow! I was brought up on the edge of Sherwood Forest and used to go with parents and friends, and run round with my imaginary bow & arrows, shooting the Sheriff of Nottingham's wicked soldiers. So Robin Hood was a local hero for me and the TV programmes, as far as I was concerned, were real stories about a real man who lived not far from me - and probably only a few years before I was born!

So many different writers have written so many tales of Robin Hood that there is some confusion as to exactly who he was, when he was born and when and how he died. It's been suggested that he wasn't a real person at all but was a character made-up from bits of real people who lived at the time of the Crusades, when the true King of England - Richard the Lionheart - was fighting to liberate Jerusalem from the Saracens, leaving his evil brother - Prince John - to seize the throne of England and oppress the people with heavy taxes and cruel landlords.

In a sense it doesn't matter exactly who Robin Hood was. He was a hero, fighting for the rights of the ordinary poor people, challenging the authority of an unlawful king, righting wrongs, and taking wealth away from the rich puppets of King John and giving it back to the farmers and small-holders from whom it had been unfairly taken. He lived the life of an outlaw, hounded by the authorities. He had no home except the leafy glades of Sherwood Forest but he did have his band of Merry Men like Little John, Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet... also outcasts and criminals who had hearts of gold and helped Robin in his moral crusade against the wicked King John and Sheriff of Nottingham.

The stories of Robin are plentiful, if sometimes a bit self-contradictory. Some say he eventually met Good King Richard when he returned from the crusades and received a Royal Pardon but continued to live his life in the Forest with his sweetheart Maid Marian and his Merry Men. Eventually he grew old and died peacefully. His old friends buried him under the Royal Oak in Sherwood Forest and they too, eventually, grew old and died - and the whole episode passed into myth and legend, leaving us only with heroic stories and a shining example of a good man who fought evil and protected the poor and needy.

Now, imagine you had absolutely no previous knowledge of Jesus and the Gospel stories. Imagine that Mark's Gospel was the first ever time you'd heard of the man called Jesus. Up until now, the story of Jesus is very similar to the story of Robin Hood. Jesus' origins were a little bit hazy to say the least. He was a good man. He spent time with the poor and needy. He challenged the authorities of his day. He gathered round him a group of Merry Men - the disciples. He had no permanent home but wandered round from town to village, doing good, helping the poor and sick, teaching his ways to the disciples and becoming a popular hero.

Now imagine that you were only given the first eight-and-a-half chapters of Mark's Gospel and you had no other accounts about Jesus' life. Imagine that you were asked to complete the story? How would your version end?

Based solely on the first half of Mark's Gospel, your account would continue the heroic adventures of Jesus. His message of peace and justice and mercy would eventually be

accepted by everyone. He would defeat the wicked Roman oppression and his land would be liberated. There would be justice, there would be peace, there would be no more poverty. Jesus himself would eventually grow old and die. His friends would bury him - then they too would grow old and die and the whole episode would pass into myth and legend and eventually become a black& white TV series to enchant the young and inspire the old.

Awwww - how nice!

But where the story of Jesus differs radically from the story of Robin Hood is the subject of tonight's passage from Mark's Gospel. This passage forms a hinge in the middle of the Gospel - a complete turning-point in the story. After tonight's episode, nothing would ever be the same again.

And the hinge - the turning point - centres on one thing: exactly who is Jesus? It's his **identity** that causes the turning point in Mark's Gospel and in human history - not the stories of his teachings, not the healing of the sick, not the scrapes with the authorities, not the establishment of a group of disciples - but his **identity**.

Robin Hood never asked his Merry Men who the people thought he was. Who he was was unimportant - it was what he did for them that mattered.

But for Jesus - the crucial thing is **Who He Is**.

Mark 8 v 27: Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." [29] "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am? Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

At the very centre of this Gospel is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Up to this point the Gospel narrative has been centred on Jesus' teachings, his help to the poor, his healing of the sick, his challenge to authority, his rejection of religiosity. After Peter's declaration on behalf of the Twelve, Mark's narrative is oriented toward the Cross and the Resurrection. From now on, the underlying double question was, "What kind of Messiah is He, and what does it mean to follow Him?" This crucial passage is the point to which the first half of the book leads and from which the second half proceeds.

Matthew gives us a more full account of this question and answer

Matthew 16:16-20

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

[17] Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. [18] And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." [20] Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Messiah, God's Anointed One.

That one statement changes the gospel account of Jesus completely and forever. No longer are we dealing just with a good human being who set a good example to the people and taught them about justice and charity and peace and love and forgiveness. It's no longer about someone helping the poor and sick and challenging the authorities of the day. It's no longer about a man starting a group or a movement of like-minded people. That one statement catapults us out of the realms of the merely human and transports us into the realms of the theological and the supernatural. We are no longer dealing with a Robin Hood: we are dealing with the divine and eternal, unique, all-powerful creator-God, the King of heaven.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Matthew's account of this episode tells us why Peter's statement was so important: ***On this rock I will build my church.*** Jesus cannot build a church on any foundation other than the one where he is recognised and acknowledged as the Son of God.

You can't build a church merely by regarding Jesus as a good man, or a perfect example of humanity. You could start a fan-club or a charity. You could form a religious organisation that taught and followed the teachings of Jesus. You could live your life according to his example ... but you cannot be his church. Without acknowledging Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, you will be no more than one of Robin Hood's Merry Men. You might do a lot of good to other people; you might become a better person yourself - but you will not, and cannot, be part of His church. Unless we acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ, the son of the Eternal God, we will never be part of anything that is more than merely human. And God calls us to far more than that. He calls us to be part of his eternal kingdom, and he sent Jesus to be the gateway into that kingdom ... and we have to recognise him as Divine.

Moving on to verse 30, we read: *Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.* Strikes you as a bit strange, doesn't it? Surely spreading the news that Jesus is the Messiah is exactly what they ought to be doing! But no - or at least not yet. It's one thing to tell people that Jesus is the Messiah, but if the people's idea about what a Messiah should be is wrong - then it'll do more harm than good. Before Jesus is ready to be publicly identified as the Messiah, he first needs to educate the people - and the disciples - about what exactly a Messiah is!

You see, the disciples and the people at large were still rather ill-informed about what the Messiah would be like. By and large, they were expecting a Messiah who would arrive in a blaze of glory, cast out Israel's enemies, establish himself as King and rule over Palestine in a prolonged Golden Age of victory, reminiscent of the reigns of the likes of King David.

It's easy for us to scoff at the Jews in the 1st century AD and shake our heads in wonder that they had such a distorted picture of their awaited Messiah. Sure enough, the prophecies about Jesus' death and resurrection are there in the OT - the fact that he would be a suffering servant, a man of sorrows etc. But it's easy for us. We read the OT through our NT glasses! Hindsight is always 20/20 vision! So let's be generous to the Jews - they were, to some extent, misled by their teachers and unclear about their scriptures.

Nevertheless, their picture of the Messiah was wrong - and Jesus needed to correct that picture before he would be identified with it. And so begins the first ever recorded Alpha Course! Mark condenses it down into one verse:

[31] He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

Matthew and Luke also condense this period of teaching into just one verse in their parallel accounts of this episode. I'm quite convinced that this period of teaching would have taken several days - but the gospel writers were probably more concerned with the narrative account, that they didn't want to break the flow by detailing all that Jesus taught them.

Anyway - at the first mention of Jesus talking about his death, Peter flies off the handle, takes Jesus to one side and says:

Listen sunshine, all this talk of you dying isn't exactly helping morale! We've just made a start on this mission, we're winning the people over, we're helping the poor, we've got the authorities running round like blue-arsed flies and all you can do is talk about coming here to be killed! Now come on! There's loads more to be done yet, so lets not have any more talk about death please! To Peter, Jesus talking about his death was just defeatist talk

Peter, you see, wanted Jesus to be a Robin Hood. He wanted to be part of a bunch of Merry Men who went around doing good and who would, hopefully, be the start of a big national movement that would eventually overturn the corrupt authorities and bring peace and freedom for all. Peter would have liked nothing more than to have this earthly mission continue until they all became old men, sitting around a campfire, swapping stories about the Good Old Days and then dying peacefully in their sleep and becoming part of the folklore of Israel.

And Jesus was tempted. So much so that he says to Peter : Get behind me Satan! In other words - stop tempting me!

Jesus could never be just a Robin Hood - no matter how tempting that was. Someone who was simply a good man could easily be a Robin Hood. But, as we've learnt, Jesus is more than just a man and, therefore, was expecting to do more than a mere human could do.

And so the teaching would have continued. Just how far Jesus went with the teaching about salvation - about the meaning of his death and resurrection, we don't know. My inkling from reading the rest of the gospel is that the disciples never fully understood what he meant - or that Jesus didn't, at the time, fully explain things to them for whatever reason. In my estimation, the disciples never fully understood the true significance of the cross and resurrection until the day of Pentecost.

But what Jesus does focus on in verse 34 on is what this news actually meant for the disciples and anyone else who wanted to be part of the cause:

[34] Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

The two requirements which, like repent and believe, are bound together. He must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.

To deny yourself means saying no to selfish interests and earthly securities. Self-denial is not to deny your own personality, to die as a martyr, or anything like that. Rather it is the denial of self ... turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness and every attempt to order your

life by the dictates of self-interest. Self-denial, however, is only the negative side of the picture and is not done for its own sake alone. Positively, a would-be follower must **take up his cross**, decisively saying yes to God's will and way. Cross-bearing was not an established Jewish metaphor. But the figure was appropriate in Roman-occupied Palestine. It brought to mind the sight of a condemned man who was forced to demonstrate his submission to Rome by carrying part of his cross through the city to his place of execution. Thus "to take up your cross" was to demonstrate publicly your submission and obedience to the authority against which you had previously rebelled.

Jesus' submission to God's will is the proper response to God's claims over self's claims. For Him it meant death on the cross. Those who follow Him must take up *their* (not His) cross - whatever comes to them in God's will as a follower of Jesus. This does not mean suffering as He did or being crucified as He was. Rather, it is obedience to God's will as revealed in His Word, accepting the consequences without reservations for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel. For some of the disciples this was to include physical suffering and even death. For others, it didn't and hopefully for us, it won't.

In the final part of that verse are Jesus' words, **Follow Me**. Clever people who understand Greek and write commentaries, point out that the word "follow" here is a present imperative: in other words it means "keep following". Saying no to self and yes to God is to continue all through our lives.

Verses 35 is self-explanatory, I think

[35] For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Self-interest will eventually cause a loss of essential life. If our self is all that we're ever interested in satisfying - then that is all we will end up with - we will be ourselves, and all alone. Whereas a loss of self-interest for the sake of the gospel will cause to find life - and life in its full and eternal abundance.

Then in vv 36 & 37 Jesus explains just how important this eternal life is.

[36] What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? [37] Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

There are no earthly pleasures or possessions, no wealth or status, no gain which begins to compare with the price of your own eternal soul. Jesus' message, although aimed at the disciples, also serves as a reminder about the importance of his own mission. If he did become a Robin Hood and eventually throw out the repressive authorities, even if he was so successful that all the poor were well off, all the sick healed, all the wrongs righted etc etc ... but he didn't fulfil the will of God - what would he have gained? Nothing. He would have disobeyed and lost everything.

And in verse 38 he drives the message home by pointing out that no only will self-interest cost you the prize of eternal life, but it will also incur God's judgement:

[38] If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Sometimes we can get ourselves into a position with people where we're quite happy to discuss our involvement with the church and the role we play in the church .. but fight shy of actually discussing our faith. It's as if being involved in church life is acceptable to most people and they'll take an interest - but as soon as you start talking about the realities of the basics of the Christian faith, they - and we - start to get a bit embarrassed and want to keep the discussion more on a human level.

I think that's part of the reason why Peter rebuked Jesus when Jesus started talking about the cross. A Robin Hood, who goes about with like-minded people, doing good is quite acceptable and everyone is happy to talk about him. But someone who reveals that he has a supernatural, or divine nature, and that the mission is something more than a mere human endeavour, starts to raise suspicion and mistrust.

And aren't we like that when it comes to talking about Jesus? It's easier to talk about him with people as if he were a Robin Hood .. someone who had excellent ideas, who did good, who was a shining example of justice and fairness ... but not as someone who is the Son of God and who came to perform the miraculous and supernatural mission of salvation.

If you ever find yourself in that kind of situation then take heart - you're not alone! But we need to pay attention to the warning in verse 38. If we are embarrassed about Jesus' true identity and his divinity, and if we're awkward about sharing with people the things that Jesus said about himself, then we're in danger of having Jesus be ashamed of us. And we have to ask ourselves if we'd rather be embarrassed in front of our friends and colleagues, or in front of Jesus Christ himself. These are harsh words but true words.

So what help do we have? I'd like to suggest two things to you:

ONE is that our strength to speak plainly about Jesus comes from the realisation of who he is. Just as Peter and the disciples declared him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God; so we must keep that realisation forefront in our minds too. We do not need to be defensive when talking about Jesus! He is the Son of God ... if anyone needs to be defensive, it's the people who have not yet accepted that he is God's Son!

The SECOND is that wonderful promise in Scripture in *Matthew 10:19-20*

Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, [20] for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Sure we need to open our mouths - but the words will come from God. Remember that Jesus told Peter that it was God's direct revelation that enabled Peter to say that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. The words will come but we must be prepared to open our mouths!

When telling people about Jesus, we're not keeping alive a Robin Hood character from the myths and legends of the past who we see in black & white television series. We are talking about the son of the living God - very much the full-colour, living and reigning king of heaven. When we tell people about Jesus, we're not just re-telling stories that happened 2000 years ago, we are bringing them into contact with a living person - the Christ, the Son of God ... the giver of life.

May we all know him as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God ... as the Lord of Heaven, and as OUR Lord too.