

I don't usually think of Jesus as being secretive? Quite the opposite, in fact. After all, his parting words to his disciples in Matthew's gospel are 'Go then and make disciples of all nations' - what we often refer to as the Great Commission.

However, there is something very odd about the way Jesus behaves throughout the opening chapters of Mark's gospel. When he performs a miracle, he tells people to keep quiet. He heals a leper and says 'See that you say nothing to anyone'. He cast out demons, and 'does not permit them to speak, because they knew who he was.' He raises a little girl from the dead and tells her parents that no-one is to know about it. He feeds 5000 people in the middle of nowhere with 5 loaves and a couple of fish, and immediately bundles his disciples into a boat to get them off the scene. Everywhere Jesus goes, the signs of the kingdom of God are spilling out from him. Why doesn't he want anyone to talk about who he is?

Of course, there comes a moment when he does want to talk about it, and our reading today is essentially the second half of that conversation. Jesus has brought his disciples out of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi - a place with a colourful history. Its ancient name was Balinas, because it had once been a great centre of the worship of Baal. Up on its hillsides was a cave which was said to be the birthplace of the Greek God Pan, the God of nature. And further up the hillside stood a gleaming white marble temple which Philip had built in honour of Caesar, the most powerful foreign God with whom Jesus' people were currently contending. Baals, Greek gods, the Roman emperor - all had been worshipped and honoured in this place, like a sort of middle eastern Glastonbury. Not an easy place for a group of Jewish men to be, as every corner represented empires that had conquered them, along with their gods.

The secret Jesus has been carrying and keeping until this point in Mark's gospel comes out in Peter's confession, just before our reading today: "You and the Christ" (or Messiah in Hebrew). God's anointed one who will save his people. But he still doesn't want it broadcast - v.30 he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Why the order to keep quiet? We get our answer in vv. 31-32.

Mark is the master of dramatic effect. In both Matthew and Luke, the shadow of the cross hangs over the story from the very beginning. Matthew tells us how the Wise men brought myrrh, a symbol of death, to the infant Jesus. Luke tells us the prophecy of Simeon while holding the baby Jesus in his arms - that the sword of suffering would pierce his mother's heart on account of him. Right from the start, death is part of the picture, and the theme of Messiahship and the cross are woven together.

But in Mark it's different, as he manages to carry these 2 enormous facts - Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus must suffer and die - like a couple of unexploded bombs for 8½ chapters, and then lobbs them in at the midpoint of his gospel. Mark wants us to feel the shock the disciples felt as these 2 things exploded together into their consciousness. The shock that Jesus is the Messiah, and the even greater shock of what he is saying is about to happen. No-one was prepared for this. The Messiah wasn't going to die; he wasn't going to lose. The Jews had been losing for hundreds of years, and the Messiah was the one to change all that, who was going to put them on the winning side and put their God on the throne of the world. Mark wants us to understand why Peter takes Jesus to one side to say - look, this can't be right. Stop talking like this. And he wants us to feel the full force of the sting in Jesus reply - to the man who has just called him Messiah - "Get Behind me Satan. You are setting your heart not on the things of God but of Man" (v.33).

2000 years later, it has lost its shock value. We know the whole story about the cross. We know it was a terrible and painful death that Jesus had to endure to deal with our sinfulness and put us right with God. And we know that everything turned out all right in the end. Jesus was raised from the dead when it was all over. The cross was a terrible thing, but it was just a temporary blip, a necessary trial endured for us by Jesus to open up the way for resurrection life and the gift of the Spirit which we can now enjoy. Wasn't it?

It's remarkable how easy it has been to domesticate the extraordinary, appalling symbol that lies at the heart of our faith. Sometimes we may need to reflect on images of the cross that are less glamorous and more realistic, for we domesticate the cross at our peril. The shock of today's text cannot be dulled by any number of years passing, or any amount of theological understanding, and it's addressed not just to the disciples, but to the crowds of whom we are surely a part: v34-36.

We would all of us like to keep the cross confined to Jesus and fixed in history. But scripture is clear that that is not the way it works. Jesus' death was unique, of course, and it did do for us what we could not do for ourselves. It was the key that burst the lock on the prison of sin and death. However, it is not an airlift; it is a walk that involves a following in his footsteps.

Why did Jesus keep his identity as the Messiah secret? Because he knew that He was not the Messiah his people were expecting. He was not anointed to overthrow the might of Rome and be crowned King of the Jews. No. His being Messiah, his anointing, was an anointing for burial; an anointing to walk the way of suffering and humiliation and death. He knew that the crowds who would fix on the signs and wonders that flowed from Him would find it impossible to understand this. He knew that He would leave them feeling bewildered and betrayed. But he also knew that those who would stay with him to the end would find that He was indeed the one who could lead them through the narrow door to freedom.

What about us? What sort of Messiah are we after? And what sort of Messiah are we proclaiming to others? A Messiah of signs and wonders who will offer some sort of easy escapism from the harsh realities of life? Or this Messiah, this Jesus, who doesn't want us to know who he is, doesn't want our praise or our worship or our allegiance until we have grasped just what he is offering; the chance to deny ourselves, and take up our cross and follow him.

And if we take that chance? We *will* find that it is the way that leads to life; we *will* see signs and wonders, because they flow from this Jesus still. We *will* see the power of death defeated. But it's not defeated by avoidance; it is defeated by the cross. And it is the cross above all, supremely, that must shape us and direct us if we are followers of Jesus. We can be thankful that we have the gifts of the Holy spirit to encourage and inspire us and give us a glimpse of the glory that is to come. But how careful we need to be never to let the gifts distract us from who it is that gives them, and how they have been won for us.

There is no baptism in the Holy Spirit that is not preceded by and rooted in a baptism in the cross. And there is no anointing in the Holy Spirit that it not also an anointing to share in the suffering and the death of Jesus. And if anyone tries to convince you otherwise, direct them to 2 Corinthians 12 or a hundred other places where Paul reminds us of the share in the cross that will be ours if we choose to follow Jesus. The gifts of the spirit are not toys, they flow from the broken heart and broken body of the one who died for us on the cross. They cost Jesus everything. If we want to walk out into the freedom that He has won for us, then there is a cost for us too. We will have to let go of our hopes, our expectations, even, in the end, our lives. But the promise is that it is in that letting go that we will find ourselves, and more important, we will find Him to be the fulfilment of more than we could ever have dreamed possible.

We may long for the cross to be a talisman or insurance, but what it offers us is something much harder, but infinitely more precious. It offers us the opportunity to walk through this life in such a way and with such a saviour that we can be part of the advance of the kingdom of love and goodness which is God. And more, we can meet death and walk through it and out of it into freedom on the other side.

*Almighty God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings, and by following in his Way come to share in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*