

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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It is certainly appropriate that on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent we are dealing with the first *Passion* prediction in Mark's gospel. The questioning that takes place in this passage occurs in the villages of Caesarea Philippi. The city was built by a son of Herod the Great as his administrative headquarters. Now uninhabited, it is 25 mi. north of the Sea of Galilee at the foot of Mt. Hermon and was known as the location of a shrine for the Greek and Roman god Pan. It was a natural place of worship which over time "had probably been dedicated to various Semitic deities." The questioning takes place not in a synagogue but "out in the world" and in a place dedicated to a pagan god with a name honoring the human Caesar." What better place than this for a discussion of the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth?

The words used here in the Passion prediction are stark. For the disciples, it would have been particularly jolting to hear that: "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering," be "*rejected*" by the leaders of Israel, and in the end be "*killed*" --- these are strong, arresting words, unexpected ones, and they get the attention of the disciples despite their inability to fully comprehend what Jesus is saying. And yet, despite the grim quality to the words of Jesus, the tone of the passage is "neither gloomy nor fatalistic." The death being spoken of here is "not a meaningless or tragic fate." In fact, it is "freely accepted and purposeful." This death is necessary in order to fulfill the messianic mission of Jesus. After all, the reality is that here death is a gateway to the resurrection. What is more, it is spoken of with assurance. This is why "Peter's attempt to deflect" Jesus from his fate merits "the sternest rebuke" possible from his Lord.

Mark's gospel makes it clear from an early point that there is growing hostility to Jesus and even hints that this could lead to death. But there is new conviction here that the death of Jesus will lead to vindication, the fulfillment of divine purpose, and anything but the "triumph of the opposition." But in order to see this, one must be willing to turn away from the natural repugnance one would feel in the face of what "appears to be defeat." That repugnance will have to give way to "the divine logic which turns human valuation upside down." At the same time, the other thing that will become clearer and clearer as events develop is that what Jesus faces is "a comprehensive rejection" by "all the leading representatives of God's people Israel." And certainly, this is a crucial element in the tragedy about to unfold.

Here Jesus' prediction of his death does not specify the means of execution. In the early first century, crucifixion would not have been the first means of execution to come to the Jewish mind. By the time Mark was writing, however, it was well known. Thus, "at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem such language (that is, regarding the monstrosity of crucifixion) is calculated to shock and evokes a vivid and horrifying image of the death march with all its shameful publicity." This does not mean, however, that Mark has simply imagined something that would have been out of place in the time of Jesus. It is more

likely that “It originates from Jesus’ own awareness of how he would die rather than Mark’s reading back the later event.”

The metaphor of taking up one’s own cross “is not to be domesticated into an exhortation merely to endure hardship patiently.” It is actually “an extension of Jesus’ readiness for death to those who follow him, not merely the acceptance of discomfort.” The injunction to deny oneself and follow him likely refers to the demand in Leviticus 16: 29 to deny oneself on the Day of Atonement. For most of us, the prospect of being a martyr is difficult to imagine. In a larger sense, then, what Jesus has in mind is the idea that “one’s own will should not be the controlling factor in one’s life.” But the kind of self-denial Jesus is articulating here goes beyond that simple generalization. It also has something to do with community and our relationship with others. One way of putting this would be to say that you should “deny your selfhood when it *rescinds* relationship or when it *refuses* community. You deny your individualism when it *rejects* intimacy.” As Christians, we define our identity as “that which is connected to Christ *and to a community of believers. We don’t do Lent alone.* Although we tend to think of penitence as an individual pursuit, it is actually a “radical *communal* experience in many ways.” What Jesus is asking us to do is to “imagine that our individual selves need the other.” Although it sounds contradictory, we can’t be our true selves apart from others.

The idea that the “coming of the Son of Man in glory” is usually thought of as referring to the *Parousia* or Second Coming, but that is not how it would have been understood at the time. In reality, it refers back to the vision of Daniel: “*I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven...to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.*” This language refers not to a specific event but to “the state of sovereign authority to which Jesus looks forward as the proper destiny of the Son of Man (a term sometimes used in the New Testament interchangeably with Son of God).” His rejection on earth will lead to “vindication and glory in heaven.” The same Son of Man who is soon to be the victim of human (injustice) will then be revealed as the true and ultimate authority.” Thus, the disciples are urged to realize that “it is recognition before the court of heaven that will matter in the end.”

For the first time in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is referred to here by the term Christ. He has been known to readers and listeners as Son of God but not until this point as “the Christ” (in Greek, *Christos* or “anointed one”) which suggested more clearly his role as the long-expected Messiah. Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ prediction of the Passion and his revelation that he will be despised, rejected, and executed is actually more understandable than astonishing or shocking. This is because “the Messiah” in Jewish tradition refers to a royal figure from the line of David, a plot line which does not fit with what Jesus is predicting. Peter is really reacting as any observant Jew of the time would have ---- he takes offense at the notion of a dishonorable end for his Lord. But after all, “one of the major questions that runs

through Mark's story" is how it is that this Jesus the Messiah will in the end "become life-giving and productive" despite an inglorious end to his career.

When Jesus says to Peter, "get behind me, Satan," he may well be referring to the *Parable of the Sower* which includes these words of explanation: "*and these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.*" Looking at Mark's gospel as a whole, we can see parallels with the trial before the Sanhedrin where the chief priests and the whole council "sought testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none." Only when the high priest asked Jesus directly "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" did Jesus answer "*I am.*" Note how this exchange recalls Mark recounting the central question Jesus posed to the disciples in chapter 8: "*who do you say that I am?*" It is to this earlier conversation that the account of Peter's reaction refers. This is the same person who at that earlier point said in response to Jesus' question: "*You are the Christ!*"

When Jesus explains that "*whoever wishes to be first will be last of all and servant of all,*" he has in mind a particular kind of servanthood: "whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." This is, however, a more striking statement than it first appears. In antiquity, "the law viewed children as little more than property until they reached the legal age of adulthood." Parents had absolute authority over them. To welcome them meant to "abandon one's authority and status, spending them on those with the least ability to repay," an almost unimaginable outcome given the mores of the time and the fact that a child without the authority of the parent was more than a rebel; he was in effect an outlaw.

As we have observed so frequently before, Jesus turned the world upside down which is why it was so difficult for people to comprehend his mission. And it explains the opposition to him which arose early in his ministry and simply grew over time.

**O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.**

#### Sources

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