

To understand Jesus is to know about the cross

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Lent 2 B – Mark 8.31-38

8.³¹ ... *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.*

Jesus is saying that whatever he was sent to do, it necessarily involves him going through terrible suffering. And he doesn't just say it once. This is the first of three passion predictions Jesus makes in Mark's Gospel. ^(9.31 & 10.33) The other two times, his closest friends respond selfishly – arguing about which one of them is the greatest ^{9.34} and asking to sit at his left and right hands in his glory? ^{10.37} So we can read Peter's response today as trying to defend some personal ambition of his own.

Where did these ambitions spring from? The answer I grew up with was that people who witnessed Jesus' ministry up close hoped he might be persuaded to take on a more political role and lead a Jewish uprising against the Romans. And as chosen, close associates of *the next head honcho*, these disciples nursed ambitions about their own importance come the revolution. But Jesus talks about having to suffer, be rejected, die and rise again. So much for their dream of a military revolution.

To be fair, Peter and the others were speaking for everyone who wanted an end to foreign occupation. They echoed the prophets who'd condemned the arrogance and selfishness of empires and bad rulers; who called for a more just rule, where

widow and orphan *would* receive care. So is Jesus's message somehow different from these messages of the prophets'? Maybe. We understand the disciples. We see wrongs in our world today that we wish God might solve with a show of force.

We often hear people – including professed Christians – calling for strong-arm solutions to social and political ills. Is that still the delusional voice of Peter? Because Jesus rebukes Peter. He reminds Peter and the others that God's priorities aren't there to serve ours. It'll take a lot for Jesus to get Peter and the other disciples to see and 'think the things of God'. Jesus's message has to cut through.

³⁴ *[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples,* (So Mark's telling us that this is for us too) *[Jesus] said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it..."*

The cross is still some way off, but Mark puts this reference to it here. He does this so we can see this early in the Gospel that we only understand who Jesus is – who we follow – when we know about the cross. Jesus is calling us to join with him and serve a very different order – to challenge the wrongs we see, yes, but know that speaking truth to power comes at a cost. These people bite. There are people here who know that from costly personal experience. But what does that achieve.

Let's look at the words of Alexei Navalny on the back of our service booklets. It's part of what he said in court after returning to Russia from Germany after the poisoning attempt on his life.



“If you want I’ll talk to you about God and salvation. I’ll turn up the volume of heartbreak to the maximum, so to speak. The fact is that I am a Christian, which usually rather sets me up as an example for constant ridicule in the Anti-Corruption Foundation, because mostly our people are atheists and I was once quite a militant atheist myself.

“But now I am a believer, and that helps me a lot in my activities, because everything becomes much, much easier. I think about things less. There are fewer dilemmas in my life, because there is a book in which, in general, it is more or less

clearly written what action to take in every situation. It’s not always easy to follow this book, of course, but I am actually trying. And so, as I said, it’s easier for me, probably, than for many others, to engage in politics...

“ ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.’

I’ve always thought that this particular commandment is more or less an instruction to activity. And so, while certainly not really enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets about coming back [to Russia], or about what I’m doing. It’s fine, because I did the right thing.

“On the contrary, I feel a real kind of satisfaction, because at some difficult moment I did as required by the

instructions, and did not betray the commandment.”
~ Alexei Navalny, 2021

Navalny found strength in obeying the call of Jesus. He heard Jesus tell us to follow him to a life where we're free to live; free to risk. He took up his cross and followed Jesus, and the people who worked with him, even though they ridiculed him for his faith, I guess they've ended up following Jesus too, albeit indirectly through Navalny.

Jesus is telling us that these are not things we achieve in our own strength or by our own work – or that some strong leader can serve them up to us. This freedom and courage are gifts from God alone. When we truly follow Jesus, the Kingdom breaks into us; the Spirit gives us the courage and the strength to serve justice and peace.

There's one confusion for us western Christians in hearing clearly what Jesus says. We tend to hear Jesus addressing us as individuals. We're not like the majority world who hear Jesus addressing us as community. Mark's gospel makes it explicit here that Jesus spoke to the crowd and the disciples; not just to Peter. ^{v.34}

That means this is a call to this community – our community – to be one which takes risks to speak truth where it's not welcome, to name wrongs which want to masquerade as something normal, and to listen always for the Christ who calls us to embody justice, mercy and faith.

And who for? Just to take one example of many, there's an epidemic of loneliness and depression in our community, particularly among young people now. We are the community which Jesus has called into being, called to creatively address such a wrong. We are called to seek out, nurture and to assist with the healing of such people. We are called to be the community that receives and welcomes such dear ones – a community where all know we are loved by God and called by

Jesus; serving him together as a living sanctuary. Amen