

## **“Who are you following?” Mark 8:31–38**

**“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

**And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Here we are... But why are we here? The sermon title may give you a hint on what answer I am looking for. Yes, we are here because we think we try to follow Jesus. Because we think that we are Jesus’ disciples.

But if we want to be someone, for example, as in this case – Jesus’ disciples, what is the first thing we need to know? What does this mean to be Jesus’ disciple? What does this mean to follow Jesus? That is not an easy question.

The author of Hebrews wrote that the Word of God is like a two-edged sword, it cuts our hearts open and reveals what we truly believe, what we truly fear, love and trust above all things. Who we truly are. Whose disciples.

Our today’s Gospel reading is just like that. It can help us to cut our hearts open and to let the light of God’s Word shine in, hopefully dispersing some darkness that we ourselves may not be aware of and bringing forth some wonderful changes.

If we are willing to let Him in... Are we? Not sure? A bit scared? But we will try it anyway. I guess that we all would consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus. His disciples. Good Christian people.

But the thing is, and today’s reading brings this to us – there are Christians and there are Christians and then there are Christians. I think three groups would suffice to broadly categorize all Christians. That’s what we will reflect on today.

**The first group are those** who say that they consider themselves Christians, and they may get very angry if anyone doubts it, but at the same time they don’t want even to hear about Jesus, or to do anything with Jesus’ family, the Church.

I am sure you all would have met at least some such nice people. There is no shortage of them in Barossa. We are not going to reflect on this group much. Their lives and priorities give the best testimonies on where they are in relationships with the Triune God. For us they are nothing less than a mission field.

Fellow human beings in dire need to hear God's truth about the dangerous trajectory they are on, and to hear the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ, about what He has done for them and what He hopes for them.

But then there are those Christians, who are like... we could say that they are almost like the apostles. We will reflect on those. Finally, there is the third group – those Christians who are Jesus' disciples after His own heart and liking, after His own definition of what it means to be His disciples. We will spend some time trying to unpack what they are like and how to be like them.

**Now, let's talk about the second group.** Those like the apostles. Remember what the apostles were like? They had left everything and followed Jesus. They spent a lot of time with Jesus. They listened to Jesus. They travelled with Jesus.

Isn't that wonderful? What else could anyone ask for? We look at them – aren't they such faithful followers? Such great Christians? But today's Gospel reading clearly and painfully reveals their problem, and perhaps ours as well.

Peter had just confessed on behalf of the apostles that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Saviour. Now Jesus begins to elaborate what exactly that means – that He will suffer many things, be rejected and betrayed and killed and after three days He will rise again.

What did Peter do? He gets really nervous, really upset. He even takes Jesus aside to rebuke Him. "What nonsense are you talking about Jesus?! May this never happen to you!" As usually Peter said aloud what others were thinking.

This incident and numerous other reveal the unpleasant truth about why they had followed Jesus. It was not for Jesus' sake. They had followed Jesus for their own sake. Jesus was the means to their desirable ends.

Peter asked elsewhere: "We have followed you, what will we get for it?" (Mt 19:27) John and James were trying to negotiate the highest positions in Jesus' future government. (Mt 20:20-22) All the apostles were hoping to receive more honour than others. (Luke 22:24)

They hadn't followed Jesus because they loved Him, feared to disappoint Him and trusted Him more than anything. They had followed Jesus, because they loved themselves more than anything, and they were hoping that being with Jesus will help them to prosper. That is what so clearly came out in Peter's rebuke.

But then Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” You are not setting your minds on the things of God, but on the things of man...

Why are we here? Where have we set our minds? On the things of God, or on the things of man? Are we here because we so love and long to be with God our Father and with our Redeemer and Brother Jesus and for God the Holy Spirit?

Are we here because more than anything we fear to lose Him, to anger Him, to displease Him? Are we here because we trust Him above everything else and we want to listen to Him, to obey Him, and to devote our lives to Him?

Or perhaps we are here because we love ourselves more than anything? Maybe because we believe that being a Christian and belonging to Christ’s Church makes us look good in our eyes and the eyes of others?

Perhaps we are here because we want this powerful God to help us to achieve our goals, to protect us, to bless us and generally to be of assistance where we ourselves are too weak to succeed? Why are we here?

This is where the Word cuts open our hearts... “And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.””

**Now we are finally getting to the third group of Christians.** Those who are after Jesus’ hearth and liking: “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me!” Sounds too harsh? Too unpleasant? Too demanding? Not loving enough?

Would we better prefer to believe that caricature of god who says: “I am not judging you, do whatever you want, and if you have any problems, run to me, and I will fix them.” It doesn’t matter what we would prefer. For this is real Jesus speaking to us, and this is how He defines who His true disciples are.

“Deny yourself!” This is the about the great reversal. Since the Fall we had wanted to occupy the role of gods. “I myself will decide what I want to do with my life, I will make up my own mind on what is good and right for me and what is not.”

Don’t we all want it? Now Jesus begins to restore the proper order of things. The Reign of God has begun among us. The Lord of Lord and the King of Kings speaks to us with His authority and demands us to lay down our selfish ambitions and entrust our lives to Him.

“I will teach you the truth, I will reveal you my good and holy will, I will guide you and empower you with my Spirit, and I will lead you and shelter you so that when this life is over, I could have you with me in my new place forever.”

“Take up your cross!” We are so used to this phrase; we tend to apply it to almost any difficulty. That’s not what Jesus meant. Our crosses are those things that we need to face and suffer because we confess our faith and try to live as Christians.

These are our crosses – when our family and friends reject us because we want to testify about the excellences of our Triune God. When others make fun of us because we listen to God’s wisdom when it comes to human sexuality.

When certain careers and pathways may be closed for us because we stand for what Jesus teaches and against what our society today believes to be trendy and virtuous. Those are our crosses.

Surely it is easier to be silent and anonymous Christians. So that no one knows. So that no one gets offended. So that there are no awkward and embarrassing moments. “Let’s just be nice and kind so that we can live quietly without any ... crosses.” Do all your friends know that you are a Christian?

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. ... For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Sounds challenging? To follow Jesus will only get harder. Let me quote you from the ACL Newsletter regarding the new Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020 just passed in Victoria.

“The bill could unleash broad powers to locate, investigate, re-educate, censure, and punish anyone who holds to and teaches Christian convictions on sexual orientation and gender identity. Shockingly, penalties could be up to 10 years’ imprisonment and a \$200,000 fine. Complaints can be reported by anyone, even those who are not affected, and can be made anonymously – even against people like you in other states.” These are our crosses...

**So, how do we follow Jesus? How could we even try?** It seems so hard, even frightening. I say we look at the apostles. Yes, at first they probably followed Jesus because of selfish reasons. They didn’t want even to hear about sufferings, and rejections not to mentioned death. But then something changed.

As the Church’s history tells us, all the apostles except John were murdered. Why? For they refused to try to save their lives, they didn’t try to gain the world, and above all – they were not ashamed of Jesus and His words even when facing death.

What has changed? How was that possible?! They had witnessed the fulfillment of Jesus’ words. They saw their beloved Teacher and Friend rejected and betrayed. They saw Him suffer so much, being accused, beaten, mocked and then carrying

His own cross through the streets of Jerusalem. They saw Him killed, and they learned that He did it ... for them. Because of how much He loved them. And He did it for us. Because of how much He loves us.

They had seen Jesus rising on the third day and the light of the Holy Spirit had shown into their hearts. Witnessing such unconditional and unfathomable love, seeing the glory of the Risen Christ had changed them to their very hearts.

Finally, they were able to set their minds on the things of God, not forced, but willingly. Finally, they were glad to deny themselves, to take up their crosses and to follow Jesus. Regardless of the cost.

Because now, more than anything ... they loved Jesus, their Master who had loved them first, who had loved them even to the death on the cross. Now the apostles had become disciples after Jesus' own heart and liking. True Christians.

We may be much like the apostles in our today's reading. Weak, selfish, seeking for our own glory and good, afraid of sufferings and even ashamed of Jesus and His words, needlessly fearing people more than our Lord Jesus.

We can't change ourselves. But Jesus can... Once the Word of God cuts open our hearts, once the Holy Spirit shines in and enlightens us with the Gospel, once we learn about Jesus love to us and His sacrifice for us, everything changes.

Such divine love invites and initiates our response ... Jesus' love creates our love, His Spirit unites us with Jesus, and then we can't help but to desire to follow Jesus as the apostles did. So that only we could have more of Him, hear more from Him, could please Him more and one day, one day... to see Him as He is.

As our glorious Risen Lord, as our beautiful God, as our kind Brother.

Amen.