

## **“The great reversal” Mark 8:27-38**

**And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.**

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

This event that the Holy Spirit has recorder for us by the hand of Mark is so familiar to most of us. We have heard it many times, and it is this our familiarity with this account, and generally our familiarity with the Christian way, that may prevent us from noticing how shocking, how radical, how revolutionary this encounter was.

This brief conversation between Jesus and His disciples, and then Peter’s confrontation with Jesus and the following message that Jesus spoke to His followers – they are incredibly radical. We can call them the great reversal.

What do I mean by this? In this event Jesus turns upside down our fallen human understanding about the true God, and He also turns upside down our fallen human understanding about what it means to have this God as our God. Let’s unpack His radical teaching and see whether we can take it in, or is it too challenging for us.

Since the very beginning, since events recorded in Genesis 3, we, meaning humanity, have desired to be like gods. It is most obviously reflected in things that the world values, that we dream about, that we strive for, that drives this world and that serves as our great motivation. What does the world value? What about power? Yes. What about influence? Yes.

What about wealth? Yes. Fame, success, raising above everyone else? Yes, yes, yes! But why? Because all of these things give us more control. And what does the humanity long for since the very beginning? Sure, to be like gods, to be in control.

Now Jesus comes and brings us this shocking revelation. We have been wrong! In what respect? Do you know? We have been living with a wrong picture of God. Our understanding of what it means to be God has been totally distorted.

We thought it is mostly about having the greatest power, about being in control, about being able to do whatever we want to do. And now Jesus confronts us: “Guys, you have gotten a wrong picture! Let me correct you!”

Yes, He Jesus had the power. The divine power. He had the power to exercise control, total control over everything. Sickesses, His enemies, demons, forces of nature, even death. And sure, He was gaining quite a bit of fame and we could think that He was incredibly successful in His ministry. Thousand and thousands streamed to Him. They even wanted to make Him a king.

See, all of that was there – power, control, fame, success... But what did Jesus do with them? We can conclude with a high degree of certainty what His followers wanted Him to do. Remember, they were not free in their own land.

They lived under the Roman regime, under this cruel and ruthless foreign super-power. They longed for freedom. They were waiting for someone who will liberate them, they waited for the promised Messiah, who will sit on the throne of the king David and will rule with justice once again.

Jesus asked them: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” That’s it! That’s Him, the long-awaited Christ, the Messiah, which means the Anointed One, the One whom God had chosen and promised.

Now together with Jesus they will be able to take back their land and to establish the kingdom where justice and righteousness reign. Finally... But then something totally unexpected and unacceptable happens.

Yes, Jesus confirms that He is the Christ, but then He goes on and says something that doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. That He “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.”

He says that He will lay down His power, that He will set aside His influence, that He will abandon this success, and will deliver Himself into the hands of those who have been opposing Him since the beginning of His ministry ... to be killed.

What the world dreams about, what we strive for, what we believe would make us like gods – the true God, the Son of God comes and lays all of that down. Why?

Because He has come to reveal what the true God is like. He has come to serve not to be served, and to lay down His life for many. More, we need to ask the question – for whom did He come to lay down His life? For those who love Him, or for those who cheer for Him? No, Jesus didn't use criteria like those. He used very different criteria. He came to lay down His life for those who needed His help.

For those who are enslaved by the fear of death, for those who are bewitched by their sin and devil, for those who cannot free themselves. Who don't even understand their situation, who rage against Jesus, who reject Him, who ignore Him. He came not because they asked ... but because they needed Him; they needed His help.

He came because we needed Him. Even if we didn't know that. That's what the true God is like. He uses everything He has – His power, His might – to save, to rescue, to serve. Not for His own benefit, but to benefit those who need His help.

That was a shocking news for the disciples to hear Jesus' prediction of what was going to take place in Jerusalem. It is still shocking to hear that the true God became one of us, more that He allowed Himself to be delivered into the hands of His enemies, to be tortured and murdered in the most painful and shameful death, suffering terrible agony naked on the cross.

He did it for you. Because we needed His help. This is how He acts. This is how He loves and cares. This is how He uses His power and influence. For others. For us. For you. For we needed Him. This is what the true God is like.

Then, as if this revelation wasn't shocking enough, Jesus goes on and turns upside down our understanding of what it means to have this God and our God. What do people expect from their gods? What is the whole idea behind having a god?

That they would help us to get what we want. We are too weak and too limited in our power and abilities, that we could use someone with more power to give us a hand. Thus, people worship whatever deity they believe would help them.

Would help them to get or achieve what they want. It is about us, about me, and what I want, and the deity is there to assist me. Similarly, the disciple who were with Jesus were hoping that He will help them to get what they longed for.

How is it with us? What about you? How do we think about our relationships with God? Too often even Christians have the same pagan understanding about God, that we need to please Him so that He then would give us what we want.

Keep the Commandments, say your prayers, give your donations... and then He will grant you your wishes. That's not Christianity! That's not about being Jesus' disciple! That is about serving ourselves and hoping to use the Triune God to advance our causes. At the same time, sure, our God has promised to care for us and

to provide for us, and He does, not questions about that. But here Jesus nails what it means to have Him as our God. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [...]

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.”

See what Jesus does? He turns it upside down. If you want to be His disciple, then it won't be about you anymore. It will be about denying yourself. Taking your eyes off your own wants and desires, and turning them towards others.

“As I came to serve you, I now send you to serve all the people whom I have placed in your life.” You are not to pursue power and influence and fame and success for yourself, using others and even your God as stepping stones for your rise.

You are going to follow Jesus' example. What does this mean? How it may look like? To give a few examples; it means to see differently everything in our lives. We learn and acquire knowledge and skills not so that we can advance ourselves, but so that we can serve and be a blessing to as many as possible.

We do our work and create new businesses not to make a name for ourselves or to pursue lucrative careers, or to accumulate wealth, we do it so that our Father can use us and fruits of our labour for the benefit of many others.

When we search for a spouse, we don't look for someone who will satisfy all our needs, but for someone whom we are committing to serve till death do part us. Our possession and wealth are not ours, they are God's gifts entrusted to us so that we would use them to advance the Gospel, to support the poor and needy caring for other as Jesus cares for us.

We don't look for a congregation where I can satisfy my spiritual needs, we look for a community where our gracious Lord can use our gifts and talents to strengthen that community so that they can prosper proclaiming the Gospel. It's not about me...

How does that sound? Not so easy? Like a cross? Our sinful hearts want it all to be about me. This is our cross that we daily let the Holy Spirit to reshape us, to transform our hearts and to make us more and more like Jesus Christ. And as it happens, as we try to live as we just described, we will need to suffer, because the world doesn't like this Jesus, even as it desperately needs Him.

Concluding there is something else that needs to be addressed. Do you wonder, how could Jesus be so self-sacrificial? How could He lay down His heavenly glory, His divine power, His influence and fame ... and do all of that for us, who rejected Him, who wanted to crucify Him, how could He do that?

This is not a theoretical question for us. Because if Jesus wants us to follow in His footsteps we need to know where to get strength not to pursue our own causes, not to gather treasures for ourselves, not to use our influence and opportunities for ourselves. How would that be possible?

The answer is – because God the Father loves you. He loved Jesus, His true Son and He looked at Him with fatherly affection and delight: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased!” Now, because you are united with Jesus by His own Spirit, God the Father similarly looks at you, at each one of you: “You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased, you are good for me, you are beautiful!”

We can’t give away the pursuit of power and wealth and success if we don’t feel that we already are good enough, sufficiently secure, that our future is in good hands, that we are loved and recognized and cherished enough. Then it is impossible.

Then we will spend our whole lives toiling to get those things, and we will struggle to give them away. But you, you are good enough, this is what your Father in heaven tells you every day, and your future is secure in His hands, not only in this age, but especially in the age to come. What no eye has seen, He has prepared for you...

You are loved, more that we can know, for Jesus Christ so loved you that He gave everything away so that you could be His own. He came when we didn’t even know we needed Him. He sacrificed Himself when we were still acting as His enemies.

When we were still dead in our sins, He gave us a new life, He embraced us with His Spirit into the divine fellowship with Him and the Father. Now He dwells in you and walks with you and nothing will make Him change His attitude towards you.

When the Holy Spirit helps all of this to sink in, denying ourselves becomes our new nature, then we long to bring joy to our Father, then we long to show to entire world the love of Jesus and we can’t but speak about who He is and what He has done.

What may seem so radical and so hard to fallen human hearts, looks like the most wonderful journey for those who are called children of God. And that is who you are! May the love and affection of our unusual God, the God of the great reversal, fills every day of your life, so that our lives abound in gratitude and joy and praise.

Amen.