

“Yes! He must die!” 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!

Have you ever been ashamed to talk about Jesus? Have you ever been ashamed to confess openly that you are a Christian? Have you ever been ashamed to admit that you believe what God reveals in the Bible? Have you kept silent about your faith when together with relatives or friends who don’t share your faith?

Have you ever? **“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.”**

This is one of those verses, which I vividly remember from my study years in seminary in Latvia. “Whoever is ashamed of me... I will be ashamed of him.” What does this mean if we are ashamed of Jesus before people? It is very simple.

It means that we value peoples’ opinion higher than God’s. That we value people’s approval higher than God’s. That we value peoples’ favour higher than God’s. That we want to please people more than we want to please our God.

Today’s Gospel reading teaches us something profoundly important. If we do not know or understand this teaching, we still are baby Christians who need to grow and mature. So, let’s pray for God’s guidance that we can understand this message well.

What will we do? **We will reflect on what kind of Saviour Jesus is. On what it means to be His disciples. And why must He suffer and die?** What kind of Saviour He is, what it means to be His disciples and why Jesus must suffer and die?

What kind of Saviour is Jesus? It is interesting, up to this moment in Mark’s Gospel Jesus has kept silent about who He is and why He has come. Surely, He has been doing things that took breath away and made people wonder – who is this with such authority?

He was preaching with authority, He was healing the blind and the deaf, lepers and paralytics... everyone, He was casting out demons, He was subduing even the forces of creation, rebuking the storm, walking on water, feeding the thousands, He was even raising the dead. Who is this? He must be someone special, someone sent by God.

When Jesus asks His closest disciples who they say He is, Peter responds on behalf of them: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”** He is spot on, yes! But then comes the unexpected. Once the disciples had identified Him as God’s Son, as God’s Anointed, and the Christ, He begins to teach boldly.

This is what Mark writes, Jesus begins to teach boldly that **“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.”**

As we will see in a minute, this is not what the disciples expected. This is not what they wanted. This is not what they were hoping for. They wanted someone who would deal with their problems. And they had plenty of problems.

They wanted someone who would bring them freedom, casting off the yoke of Romans, they wanted someone who would bring them well-being, where hunger, thirst and sickness would be the things of the past. They wanted someone who would bring justice.

Must suffer... be rejected and be killed... and then rise again... That didn’t make sense. Of course, it all will make sense to them later, when they meet their crucified and risen Lord Jesus but not at that moment.

They couldn’t not understand that Jesus has indeed come to give them freedom, justice and true well-being. Not the way they expected. On a universal scale. The Creator had come to restore and renew His entire creation. We see as our enemies those who are right before our eyes, those who oppress us, treat us unjustly, threaten our well-being.

Jesus, the Son of the living God, on the other hand, came to deal with our real enemies, with the enemies behind the scenes, with our ultimate enemies, with the very root and cause of all our problems. He came to triumph over sin, devil and death.

Not by chopping off heads and destroying cities, but by means of this great mystery, by giving His own body to be destroyed on the cross. To save us and also those whom we may consider our enemies, so that one day He could bring us all together as His friends and His family.

See, it is not enough to believe that there is a god. That is not a Christian faith. It is not even enough to believe that Jesus from Nazareth is the true God and true man, the Son of the living God. We also need to know what kind of God He is. He comes with great humility. He turns everything upside down.

He celebrated the greatest victory in His death of the cross. He made the instrument of death into the source of life. He doesn’t destroy His enemies, but conquers them from inside, when we learn about His devotion to us. He conquers our hearts. We surrender. And He calls us, He calls you: “Deny yourself, take your cross and follow me!”

He is such a strange Saviour, sure, but **what does it mean to be His disciples?** This is such a painful question. Look at the disciples of Jesus! What a great bunch! What a committed group of followers! Just look at them!

They had left their lives, they had followed Jesus, they were together with Him days and nights. Amazing! They believed that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God. What more could anyone expect, right?! If only we could have more such disciples in our congregations. Or not? What do you think?

Yes, they had done all of that. Sure. Impressive. But more importantly, why did they do that? What was their motivation? And that is what this event reveals. When Jesus begins to speak boldly, explaining what He must do, what was their reaction?

Notoriously, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Rebukes! “Stop this nonsense! May this never happen! You are the Christ, our Saviour!” And Jesus famously replies: **“Get behind me, Satan!”** Satan?! Why would Jesus say that?

That’s Peter, the leader, the spokesperson among His closest followers! This tells us something very important. How does Satan resist God’s plans? How does he do it now? One of the ways, perhaps, the most efficient is... through Jesus’ disciples. Through Christians.

Through us. When instead of **“setting our minds on the things of God [we set them] on the things of man.”** When instead of listening to Jesus, we want Jesus to listen to us. When instead of seeking God’s will, we expect Him to do our bidding.

This is exactly what the disciples had done. They had followed Jesus, for they were hoping that He would help them to get what they wanted. Now, how true is this also for us? Why are we here? Why do we follow Jesus?

Is it for His sake, or for ours? **“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.”**

This one goes deep. See what Jesus says. **“Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”** It is not that easy to make sense of what Jesus says. If you would save your life, you will lose it.

How would that work? It is actually quite simple. It is about the fundamental choice, about where do we put our trust? In the Triune God, in Jesus Christ, or in ourselves and in God’s gifts. Who do we expect all good from, where do we expect to find security?

Do we expect it from Jesus, or from our body and reason and all our senses, from clothing and shoes, from food and drink, from house and spouse and children and all our goods? Where is our ultimate allegiance? Who do I value the most?

Who do I fear to lose the most? Who or what do we believe will give us life and will give it abundantly? Jesus or all our resources here? There are hard questions. At least I find them very challenging. They reveal the rot deep within...

Let's test ourselves. Let's reflect on these questions. Can we be radically generous? Giving way more than we could humanly speaking afford? If not... why? What hinders us? Will that threaten our life? Our quality of our life? Will we lack something? What? Some luxury or conveniences, some safety for the future? Who do we trust?

Can we be radically selfless? Can we ask questions: "Lord Jesus, how can I serve you best? What would you want me to do? How should I prioritize my life? What would serve your mission, and my neighbours, and your Church the best?"

Are we willing to ask that question? Or are we scared that we won't like the answers? Most likely we won't, for they won't be about us and our convenience. "What if God's ideas for my life differ from what I wish to do? What if He challenges me?"

What does this tell us? Do we want to deny ourselves? Do we want to take up our crosses, meaning – to suffer, lose, miss out, etc. because we want to follow Jesus? Or do we want to be in control? "Yes, Jesus, I will hang around you, but on my terms. For I know better. I trust my judgment more than yours. May my will happen!"

Are we ready to ask such questions as a congregation? How could we use all the gifts, talents, opportunities that the Lord has given to us for the sake of His Kingdom? Or rather not, what if we don't like the answer? What if it interrupts our peaceful lives?

This is a hard one. For this is what He calls us to do: "Deny yourself!" "How can I do that!" "Take up your cross!" "Yes, but I don't want to!" "Follow me!" "Yes, but I want to do things my way!" Whoever wants to save their life, will lose it, whoever gives it up for Jesus, will save it... Sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Here we come to the last point. **Why must Jesus suffer and die?** Why did He say that He must suffer and die? Because of us, because of you. Because we are ashamed of Him. Because we do trust our God. Because we don't trust His will and wisdom for our lives. Because we want to save our lives. Because we deserve God's wrath and we would lose our life. This is why Jesus said He must suffer and die. Because of our sins.

He came to take our place. He came and said: "Your shame, I take it upon me! Your greed, I take it upon me. Your lack of trust in true God, yes, put it on me, I take it! I will become your sin. I will get nailed to the cross. I will receive God's wrath, all of it will come upon me."

"Yes, but what about us, Jesus?" "What about you? I set you free. You are free. You are forgiven. I give you the gift of my own Spirit, He will bind us together, my heart and yours. Now we are one. You and me. And I will give you life, and I will give it to you abundantly. True life. Everlasting life. Worry about nothing.

It's done. It's finished. I denied myself and considered you as more significant. I took my cross, actually I went to the cross for you. And now I have gone through the death into life so that you could follow me with joy. Come, follow me!"

This is it. This is what you get. He is a strange God and a strange Saviour, and it is so good to be His disciples. So good. Amen.