

✕ May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O god, my strength and my redeemer.

Today's Gospel reading has a LOT in it: We have-

- Jesus asking the disciples, "who do others say I am?"
- Jesus asking, "who do YOU say I am?"
- Peter's asserting that Jesus is the Messiah.
- Jesus telling the disciples not to tell anyone that.
- Jesus foretelling his coming suffering, death and resurrection.
- Peter rebuking Jesus,
- and Jesus rebuking Peter right back.

And then we have Jesus addressing the crowd, telling them difficult things, like:

- take up your cross
- those who love their life will lose it
- and if you are ashamed of me I will be ashamed of you right back.

It's a lot. Especially since it's all a bit confronting.

Jesus' words are not the loving words we *imagine* Jesus would say, they even seem harsh - Jesus calling his friend 'Satan' just because he didn't like what he said? Yikes!

But that is actually pretty typical of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. I really like Mark's Gospel for that reason - Jesus comes across as rather exasperated a lot of the time. It reminds me not to let my image of Jesus become too cosy. Jesus was unsettling, turning expectations upside down and shaking people out of their complacency.

So far, the story of Jesus and the disciples has been going pretty well. Jesus has been performing miracles, teaching, calling out hypocrisy, and gathering a large following. Then we reach this point in the Gospel, where Peter makes the profession of faith: you are the Messiah!

Of course, the Messiah was someone the people were waiting for. Different groups had different ideas about the Messiah, but in general, he was the one that would save the Jewish people from political oppression, a militant leader who would overthrow the occupiers and restore Israel, bringing the long-awaited victory. And until now, that would seem like that was where this story was headed.

But once Peter has affirmed his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, everything turns. Jesus foretells his suffering and death - all sorts of awful things that were very un-Messiah-like, according to the expectations.

The story shifts from being an upward trajectory for Jesus and the disciples, to a downward trajectory, as authorities conspire against Jesus, Jesus prepares for what is to come, and they journey toward Jerusalem, and so toward the cross.

At this point in the story, Jesus moves on from addressing just his disciples - he calls "the crowd over". Convenient, we might think, that Jesus has a crowd just waiting around at a polite distance for him to beckon. But this writing technique expresses that what Jesus is about it say is for everyone. In effect, it is us he is calling over.

And then he says some rather uncomfortable things.

He says those who would follow him must pick up their cross. That those who love their life will lose it, and that those who hate their life for his sake would gain eternal life. And that whoever was ashamed of him, he would be ashamed of when he comes in the Glory of his Father.

This all might seem rather full on to us! How on earth should we *apply* these instructions? *Context* makes a world of difference here.

When Mark's Gospel was written, Christians were being persecuted, even killed, for their faith. This central instruction in Mark's Gospel is there to speak to those Christians who were facing *literal* death if they dared declare themselves Christian. The temptation would have been to deny your faith, maybe believe in secret but not admit it publically. But Mark's Jesus says that will not do. To hide faith in Christ in order to save one's own life would be to lose it. Integrity of faith is what Mark's Jesus is calling for here.

This message is not only for those early Christians who were being persecuted, but it is still relevant today. We are just so fortunate to be in a position where this advice is not all that applicable to us, since we can profess the Christian faith without fear of death. That is not to say that following Christ is easy. There are still demands of us. But when we take up our cross, we are not walking towards possible crucifixion, which the early hearers of this Gospel may have been soon doing if they remained faithful to Christ. Our cross entails a different cost: that cost... is learning to love God above all else.

And without the urgency, the high stakes or persecution, this can actually be quite hard. We have to sustain our faithfulness amid the humdrum, the tedium, the excitement and the dramas of everyday life. As time passes, we might grow comfortable with our faith being just another thing in the catalogue of our identity. If we are not being asked to die for it, do we consider it something worth dying for?

And yet, in a way, we are dying. Every day that we do not nurture our faith, we are less alive than we could be. This is because God is the alpha and the omega - God is our beginning, and the end to which we are moving, God is our home and our goal.

And without remembering our goal, we become aimless, lost, purposeless, we put our energies into things that do not give us life, things that cannot fulfil or satisfy. Putting God first is its own kind of challenge for us who can live our faith in comfort.

If we can teach ourselves to put God first, to make God so central to our *daily* lives, to our sense of self, that we knew we could not forsake him and *fully live*, then we will, in spirit, be fulfilling Jesus' instruction. And how grateful I am that fulfilling this in spirit is all that is being asked of us today.