

St Nicholas Sighthill Parish Church
Sermon 1 March 2015:
Psalm 22: 23-31 & Mark 8: 31-38
Carry your cross, and follow Jesus

Psalm 22: 23-31 - Introduction

The moving declaration of gratitude to God in Psalm 22 is all the more telling given the first part of the Psalm, which expresses bitterness and despair about the extremity the writer is experiencing. But it affirms that God's promises are kept.

For example, God kept his promise to Abraham and Sarah by blessing them with a child and making good his promise that Abraham would have more descendants than he could imagine.

Mark 8: 31-38 - Introduction

After the astounded realisation on the part of the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah that the nation has awaited for generations, Jesus brings a dose of reality as he speaks of his suffering and death, provoking their incredulous reaction.

Psalm 22:23-31 Good News Translation (GNT)

²³ "Praise him, you servants of the LORD!
Honour him, you descendants of Jacob!
Worship him, you people of Israel!

²⁴ He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering;
he does not turn away from them,
but answers when they call for help."

²⁵ In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done;
in the presence of those who worship you
I will offer the sacrifices I promised.

²⁶ The poor will eat as much as they want;
those who come to the LORD will praise him.
May they prosper forever!

²⁷ All nations will remember the LORD.
From every part of the world they will turn to him;
all races will worship him.

²⁸ The LORD is king,
and he rules the nations.

²⁹ All proud people will bow down to him;
all mortals will bow down before him.

³⁰ Future generations will serve him;
they will speak of the Lord to the coming generation.

³¹ People not yet born will be told:
"The Lord saved his people.

Mark 8:31-38 Jesus Speaks about His Suffering and Death

³¹ Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life." ³² He made this very clear to them. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. "Get away from me, Satan," he said.

“Your thoughts don't come from God but from human nature!”

³⁴ Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. “If any of you want to come with me,” he told them, “you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. ³⁵ For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. ³⁶ Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! ³⁷ There is nothing you can give to regain your life. ³⁸ If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”



Sermon: Mark 8: 31-38

How have your perceptions of Jesus changed throughout your Christian spiritual journey? In this passage, Jesus asks the disciples about their perceptions of Him, and then challenges their ideas about "the Christ". In fact this reading raises a number of questions and hence we will look at the reading from a series of questions and answers.

Let's go back to verses 27-30 when Peter first states that he believes that Jesus is the Christ in answer to the question who do you say I am?

Q1: Why does Jesus ask for the disciples thoughts about His identity, instead of just telling them who He is? Why does Jesus first ask what others are saying?

Do people answer this question much differently today?

A good percentage of unbelievers today believe that Jesus was a great teacher or prophet, much the same as the reference here to Elijah, John the Baptist, and other prophets.

Q2: What does it mean that Jesus is "the Christ"?

"Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah", which means "Anointed One". This term was used in Old Testament times of kings, priests and prophets which were chosen and empowered by God for a particular task. The Jews were expecting an ultimate Messiah who would deliver them and establish his kingdom.

Q3: How does Jesus respond to Peter's confession and why? He warns them "not to tell anyone about Him", Jesus acknowledged the truth of Peter's statement, but made it clear that this was not time for their public proclamation of His identity.

The reason could be to prevent the crowds from acting on their nationalistic conception of the Messiah by forcing a political coronation of Him.

Also, Jesus may have wanted the disciples to improve on their understanding of His Messiah-ship, before allowing them to share it with others.

The disciples grasped Christ's identity more fully only after His Passion and Pentecost. Only then, did Jesus send them as his "witnesses...to the ends of the earth."

Q4: How did Christ's prediction of His suffering and death have sounded to His disciples?

They were shocked and appalled that such a terrible end would interrupt this ministry of miracles which drew such big crowds. And they expected upward, not downward mobility in His future. "The Christ" was supposed to be a symbol of strength, not weakness!



Q5: How could Peter rebuke the one he had just called "the Christ"?

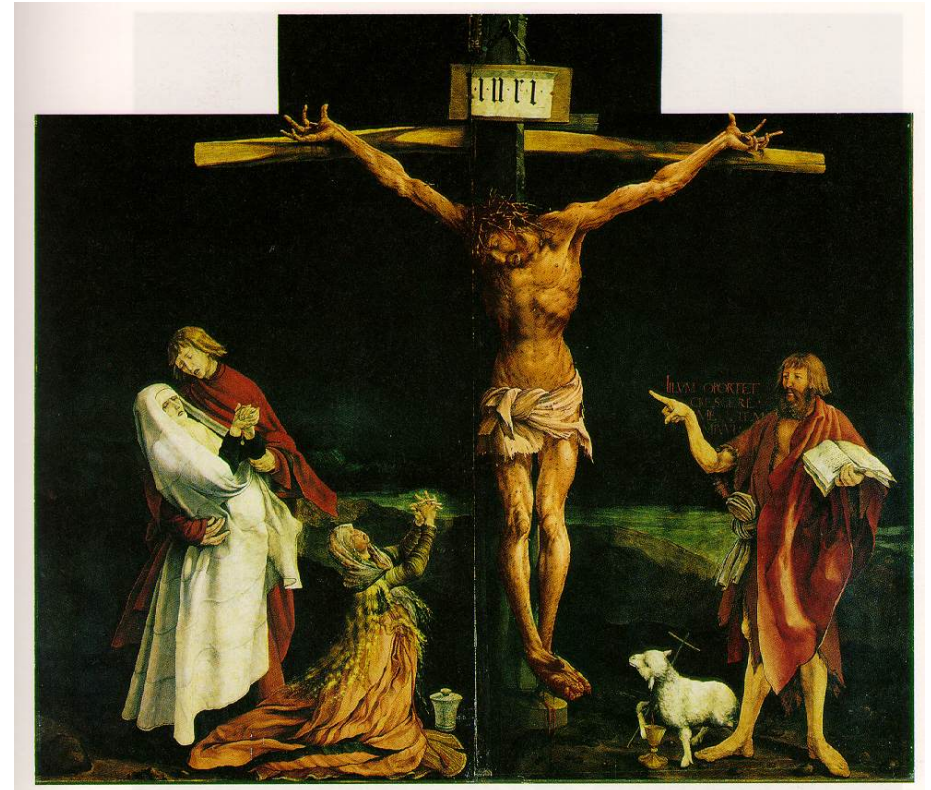
Peter's idea of "the Christ" was not a suffering servant, but a conquering king. He could also be expressing natural concern for his friend who had taken centre stage in his life.

Q6: Why was Jesus so harsh with Peter, calling him "Satan" in front of the other disciples?

Jesus was so focused on the cross that He wouldn't tolerate any suggestion to divert him from His mission. Peter's suggested diversion was similar to Satan's, who had tempted Jesus to opt for immediate worldly power.

Q7: How do verses 34-38 expound on what Jesus has just said about His suffering?

Jesus says in effect: "Not only must I suffer, but you must as well if you choose to follow me!" This became especially true of Peter and the apostles.



Q8: What does it mean to deny self and carry the cross? Jesus isn't calling us to deny ourselves certain luxuries or bad habits, but to deny our perceived right to direct our own lives. We are to renounce ownership of ourselves, and submit unswervingly to God's will.

This often brings opposition, as it did to Jesus. Whatever the cost, **Jesus calls us to say "no" to self and "yes" to God.**

How easy that is for me to say that today, how difficult it is for us to do in practice!

Q9: What paradox does Jesus give us in verse 35?

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." In other words, whoever retains control of his own life actually forfeits the authentic life that only Jesus gives.

On the other hand, whoever allows his own will to be crucified receives spiritual and eternal life –

Jesus teaches here about the value of one's soul.

One's soul is worth more than the "whole world". Jesus points out the stupidity of obtaining what this world offers by trading away the most valuable possession we could ever have.

Q10: What does Jesus promise in verse 38? If you are ashamed of me now, I will be ashamed of you later says Jesus.



Let's ask Jesus now for the strength to follow Him wherever He may lead us, whatever the cost in response to God's love, grace, and truth:

That is the theology explained through a series of questions and answers. But what does it mean to us: hence I would like to ask us this question:

Having decided to follow Christ, what is the level of our commitment?

In other words, what does it mean to “take up our Cross and follow Him?”

To explore that challenge a little further, I suggest that we have three possible levels of commitment to God.

We can decide to put His will first in our lives **some of the time or most of the time or all of the time.**

If we follow Peter’s example, we find Peter made each of these choices at different stages of his Christian life.

The first choice: We can decide to put His will first some of the time in our lives

In today’s Gospel reading we see Peter rebuking Christ when Jesus told his disciples that he must suffer and die.

At this point in his life, Peter wanted a comfortable Christianity to follow..... He wanted the first choice.

He loved Jesus and wanted only the nice things associated with Christianity – For example he liked the miracles Jesus performed, Jesus’ beautiful teachings, and being around Jesus as his follower. These all fitted Peter’s theology - but the Cross didn’t.

Today we are sometimes like Peter at this time of his life. We can have two spheres of life: a Christian life and a secular life.

How often do we fear being thought of as too fanatical by our friends and neighbours?

Are there times when we are ashamed of being Christians?

Yet Jesus said in Mk 8:38 "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels."

2. The second choice is: Do we put God’s will in our lives most of the time.

Matthew records a scene between Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin and his trial before Pilate. Peter has just denied knowing Christ three times.

Matthew records this:
“Immediately a cock crowed. Then Peter remembered the words Jesus had spoken; ‘Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times’. And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Mt. 26:74&75)

Peter wanted to follow Jesus totally, but when it came to the crunch, he lacked courage. I am sure many of us would have lacked courage too under such circumstances.

We find ourselves wanting, like Peter to be totally committed, yet holding back.

3. The Third Choice we have is, do we put his will first in our lives all of the time?

Before the Crucifixion, we read of Peter denying Christ but after the Resurrection of Jesus and following the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, we see a totally different Peter.

He was bold to preach the risen Lord, even before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. When they threatened to beat him and made veiled threats, he replied:

“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have heard” (Acts 4:19)

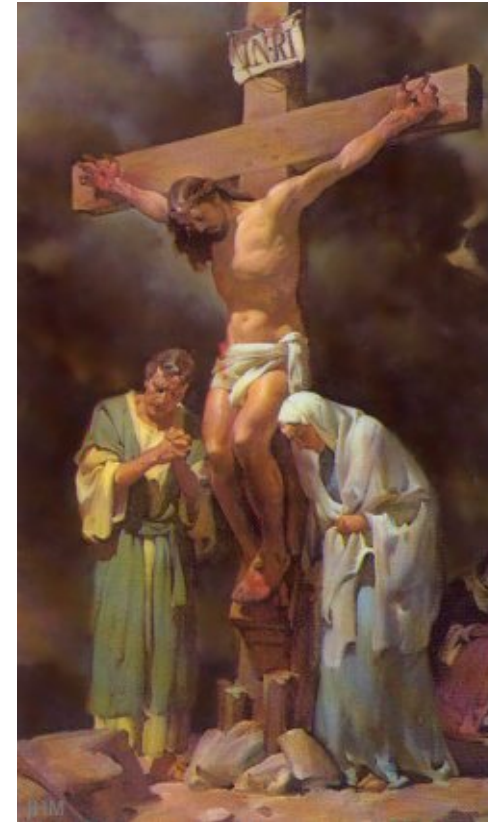
But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges!

Here we see a very different Peter, totally committed to Jesus and without fear.

Conclusion:

The future of this church here and the Church of Scotland depends upon the individual’s commitment to Jesus: are we partly interested, reasonably interested, or fully committed.....that is the challenge for us.

Forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow Jesus.....and let us give our all in our worship and service today, and in the days ahead. Amen (1407 words)



Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life.”