

Mark 8:27-38 (Roller Coaster faith)
Sermon by dele Agbelusi On 13th September 2009

Have you ever had that feeling of being on top of the world? You feel so close to God that your faith in him can move any mountain out of your way. You feel as though you are in the presence of God in the heavenlies and nothing else on earth matters. Are there other times when you feel abandoned by God, when it appears as though someone is throwing stones at you from heaven instead of manna? How do we explain this up and down, roller-coaster type of faith? Is it as a result of our changing circumstances? May be. But I think it is more than that. It has to do with our concept of God. Who do we think God is; What is he doing and what do we expect him to be doing or not doing? When these thoughts unravel, we know we are set for a roller-coaster type of faith. This is the situation in which Peter and the other disciples found themselves when Jesus asked them a question: Who do men say that I am and who do you think I am?"

It is quite amazing that Jesus asked these questions in Caesaria Philippi, a town with amazing history. In the olden days, it was the centre of Baal worship, and it was reputed to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature. At the time of Christ when Philip was in charge, there was a temple built in honour of Caesar who was acclaimed to be a god. From a cave on the hillside gushed forth a stream which was held to be the source of the river Jordan. The Jordan river will bring to mind episode after episode in the history of Israel and the conquest of the land.

Jesus did not ask this question because He didn't know who He was, or because He had a twisted dependence on the opinion of others. He asked this question as an introduction to a more important follow-up question. It must be borne in mind that there were some prevailing theories and theologies about the Messiah. The expected another king like David who would make the Jewish race great in righteousness and power (Isaiah 9:7, 11:1; Jeremiah 22:4, 23:5, 30:9)

In between the Testaments were written many books which forecasted how God would intervene in the world and set up a new age through the Messiah. The time which would precede the coming of the Messiah would be a time when the world would be in chaos; when the physical and moral order would be in a state of collapse. Into this chaos would come a herald who would announce the coming of the Messiah. It was a grim picture. Israel would rejoice to see her enemies broken and in hell. Even the dead Israelites were to be raised up to share in the new world. Finally, there would come a new age of peace and goodness which would last forever.

These were the ideas that people had when Jesus came. No wonder, he had to re-educate his disciples in the meaning of Messiahship. In response to Jesus question, the disciples feebly said, 'Some say, John the Baptizer; others say, Elijah; others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, ' You-who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are God's Anointed One.' And he insisted that they should tell no man about him.

Those who thought that Jesus was *John the Baptist* didn't know that Jesus and John had ministered at the same time. However, those who saw Jesus as **John the Baptist** or **Elijah**, must have hoped for a political messiah who would overthrow the corrupt powers oppressing Israel.

Peter knew the opinion of the crowd - while it was complimentary towards Jesus - wasn't accurate. Jesus was much more than John the Baptist, or Elijah, or a prophet. He was more than a national reformer, more than a miracle worker, more than a prophet. Jesus is **the Christ**, the Messiah.

Calling Jesus the Messiah was right on the mark, but easily misunderstood. In the thinking of most people in Jesus' day, the Messiah was a political and national superman. "Toward the close of the OT period, the word 'anointed' assumed a special meaning. It denoted the ideal king anointed and empowered by God to deliver his people and establish his righteous kingdom." (Wessel)

In verses 31-32a Jesus reveals His mission plainly: to come and die, and then rise again. Why **must** Jesus **suffer many things** and **be killed**? Because this was the predicted work of the Messiah (Isaiah 53:3-12). He **must** die, and He **must** after His death **rise again**.

This must have been an unbelievable shock to anyone expecting or hoping that Jesus was the national and political messiah. It is as if a candidate for the post of Prime Minister announced, toward the end of his campaign that he will go to No 10 to be rejected and executed.

'A suffering Messiah! Unthinkable! The Messiah was a symbol of strength, not weakness.' (Wessel) In a 'painkiller' culture, a balanced understanding of suffering is difficult to achieve. Jesus sets out the challenge for us to think as God does not as human beings normally do. There is a danger in concluding that suffering and self-sacrifice are always undesirable. There are times God tries to tell us something through our pains and trials. Prayer is important in healing, but prayer is an opening up of ourselves to what God wills, not an exercise in forcing God to do our will.

Peter must have been thinking what others were thinking. Blasphemy. God's Messiah could not be killed. So, he rebukes Jesus. Peter's intention was love for Jesus, but he was unwittingly used of Satan. You don't have to be demon possessed to be used of Satan, and we need to be on guard lest we are unwittingly used..

Matthew 16:17-19 gives us a little more insight into this passage. We read there that after Peter made the confession of faith recorded in Mark 8:29 (*You are the Christ*), Jesus then *answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.* We can infer that if Peter was bold enough to **rebuke** Jesus, he was confident that God told him what was right and that

Jesus was wrong. Where it all broke down was that Peter was far too confident in his ability to hear from God.

What Peter said didn't line up with the Scriptures

Jesus spoke sternly to Peter, **Get behind Me, Satan!** For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." The second statement explains the first. The verb for rebuke *epitimao* has been used to refer to silencing demons. Peter appears to have fallen in the same trap as Jesus' relatives who think Jesus is insane and needs to be exorcised. Even without the sharp language, anyone growing up in a traditional society would be horrified to observe a disciple taking this tone with his teacher. Jesus' swift reaction, even calling Peter Satan, is appropriate after such an affront.

Jesus knew there was a satanic purpose in discouraging Him from His ministry on the cross, and Jesus would not allow that purpose to succeed. Satan had tempted Jesus earlier to take another route to save mankind- a route of ease where he could use his divine powers to win the hearts of the people even if their sin remained. Jesus did not love to die, but willing to do the father's will even if it meant death. At this moment, Jesus was refighting the battle in the wilderness.

It is a strange thing, and sometimes a terrible thing, that the tempter sometimes speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend. We can be sure that Peter *was not aware* that he spoke for Satan, just as a moment before he was not aware that he spoke for God. It is often much easier to be a tool of God or of the devil than we want to believe.

Vv34- 38. Take up your cross...

In light of His mission, Jesus warns those who want to follow Him. This part of the gospel is central to the Christian faith and we must take it in sentence by sentence.

Jesus never sought to lure anyone to him by the offer of an easy way. It was bad enough for the disciples to hear that Jesus would suffer, be rejected, and die on a cross. Now Jesus tells them that they must do the same thing! Everybody knew what Jesus meant when He said this. Everyone knew that the cross was an unrelenting instrument of death. The **cross** had no other purpose.

The **cross** wasn't about religious ceremonies; it wasn't about traditions and spiritual feelings. The cross was a way to execute people. it was a one-way trip, never a round trip.

"Cross bearing does not refer to some irritation in life. Rather, it involves the way of the cross. The picture is of a man, already condemned, required to carry his cross on the way to the place of execution, as Jesus was required to do." (Wessel)

Jesus makes **denial of self** equal with **taking up the cross**. The two express the same idea. The cross wasn't about self-promotion or self-affirmation. The person carrying a cross knew they couldn't save themselves.

“Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities. But we deny self when we surrender ourselves to Christ and determine to obey His will.”
(Wiersbe)

Denying self means to live as an others-centered person. Jesus was the only person to do this perfectly, but we are to follow in His steps. This is following Jesus at its simplest: He carried a cross, He walked down death row; so must those who follow Him. What he demanded that his disciples should face, he too was ready to face.

If we would follow Jesus Christ, we must say no to ourselves and yes to Christ. We must say no to our own natural love of ease and comfort.

We may sum up this passage by saying it is possible to sacrifice eternity for the moment. We would be saved from a roller coaster faith and making all kinds of mistakes if we always looked at things in the light of eternity and God's Word. Many things which are pleasant at the moment may be ruinous on the long run. Those who see things as God sees them will never spend their lives on the things that are literally soul-destroying.