

Sermon – 2nd Lent St Johns Online, 28 Feb 2021

Mark 8:31-end



It seems there has been a rush this week to book summer holidays following Boris Johnson's 'Roadmap out of lockdown'.

What were holidays like for you as a child? For us it was getting in the car and going to Eastbourne for a week. We would stop at service stations to punctuate the journey and they became a way to track our progress. The journey seemed to last forever, but Mum had a road map, navigating our way safely. This week we focus on the second of our Lenten readings from St Mark, and Jesus is also setting out his roadmap. The problem is, Peter and the disciples don't at all like what they're hearing.

It becomes clear that the destination Jesus is describing is markedly different from the one which Peter and the other disciples had envisaged. At that time the Jewish nation was under Roman occupation, eagerly awaiting the fulfilment of the promise of a Messiah the Jews thought would overthrow their Roman oppressors. The roadmap Jesus is describing isn't an exit from the oppression of years of Roman lockdown, it is instead an increasingly bitter path of personal suffering and rejection, humiliation and betrayal, which v32 tells us Jesus

explained to them *'quite openly'*. To Jesus' followers this would have been hard to hear, the exact opposite of where they thought they would be headed. Peter would have wrestled with a question we can often face today: How can God be the orchestrator of a future where suffering takes place to someone truly good like Jesus? Surely there must be an easier path. So Peter begins to challenge Jesus, v32 says that he *'took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him'*. Jesus, turning to all his disciples, publicly tells Peter: *'Get behind me, Tempter! for you do not have in mind the purposes of God, but the purposes of men'*

So does this passage have any relevance for us today as we progress forward in lent? Jesus' rebuke at first seems pretty harsh, until we examine it more closely. Remember from last week, Jesus had been tempted in the desert. The essence of the devil's temptations are simple, just like in the garden of Eden: take the easy path, you don't have to pursue a road of pain and suffering, you don't have to die on the cross. And that is exactly the sentiment that echoes in Peter's words: Jesus could be their longed-for military messiah, the overthrower of Roman oppressors. Jesus could be the hero, not the victim. But these are the purposes of men, and not God's purposes. Short term gain at the expense of long term flourishing. How often have we seen this in history! Peter's roadmap could make them heroes and rulers – at least until the full might of the Roman military machine was brought in to crush the revolt, like it eventually was when the Jews rose up decades later, and in AD70 resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus faces this temptation but remains, thankfully, focused on his destination. His Vision is not a short-term victory over the Romans but the rescue of all humanity. His roadmap is to create a bridge where we as God's children can be reconciled to our loving heavenly father, restoring things to how they were originally intended to be. There is an encouragement and a warning that Christians can take from this passage:

The first is that Christ understands our temptations. That Jesus is so strong in his rebuke is perhaps an indication of how acutely he must have felt tempted. He knew the death he was headed for, and the bitterness of suffering of that long road; it must have been incredibly tempting to be offered an easier route - the life of a hero, ruling from a palace in luxury. Short term, self-focused gain or gratification, at the expense of long term flourishing. As the Message translation puts it *'What good would it do to get everything you want and lose the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?'* What might our modern equivalent be? Situations perhaps where we are tempted to make personal gain from the exploitation of people or our planet. Interestingly not too far removed from what Sir David Attenborough was saying to the UN this week.

The second point is that God can work through even the most dire of circumstances, the most bitter of sufferings and bring good out of it. Let's be clear here, God isn't dishing out suffering, like some divine despot. The violence Jesus is to suffer is not God ordained. God is not willing people to commit wrongdoing but stands outside of time and can see what

choices people will make, the decisions of Pilate and Herod, the actions of the Roman soldiers when they brutalise Jesus. And we stand amazed as we glimpse the wondrously redemptive nature of a truly good, truly omnipotent God, whose plans evil can never thwart. For when from human eyes, it seems all is going to be lost, instead of evil gaining a victory, good wins its ultimate triumph through God's goodness and grace. That's the difference between God's roadmap and ours, Peter's and Jesus'. It's a reason to be encouraged during our Lenten studies and have hope especially when we feel life's events have conspired against us. God always works for our good.

Over the past few weeks, I have been working with representatives of the PCCs from our three churches to create a Vision for our three churches, a roadmap to take us forward for the next five years and beyond. It's been a time when, like Jesus and Peter, we've had to listen hard to really discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us. We had some great ideas from our parish which I'm grateful for and have helped us along the way. I'm really excited about our new Vision, the roadmap for mission going forward, and I'll be sharing this with you shortly at our APCM. For now, I want to conclude with a verse from Romans which offer us great encouragement for when we feel life might be set against us or things just aren't going our way. This is Romans 8:28: *'²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ³¹ If God is for us, who can be against us?'* Amen.