

24TH SUNDAY (B) MARK 8: 27 - 35

MARK'S GOSPEL DESCRIBES A LEARNING EXPERIENCE, FIRST OF ALL FOR THE DISCIPLES BUT ALSO FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE HEARING IT PROCLAIMED TODAY. GETTING TO KNOW JESUS, HAVING A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM HAPPENS THROUGH HIS WORD (THE GOSPELS AND THE OTHER BOOKS OF THE BIBLE). IT ALSO HAPPENS THROUGH PRAYER AND THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS WE SHARE. AND FOLLOWING JESUS HAS PROFOUND EFFECT ON HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES. WE KNOW THAT, BUT LIKE THE DISCIPLES WE DON'T CATCH ON TO ALL THAT IT MEANS AT ONCE. IN TRUTH, IT TAKES A LIFETIME.

LAST SUNDAY WE HEARD THE STORY OF THE MAN WHO WAS DEAF AND UNABLE TO SPEAK. THE STORY OF THAT MAN'S HEALING IS A KIND OF PARABLE OF HOW WE GRADUALLY LEARN TO LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF CHRIST'S LIFE AND HOW WE LEARN THE WAYS TO SHARE OUR EXPERIENCE OF GETTING TO KNOW JESUS WITH OTHERS. YOU MAY REMEMBER HIS HEALING HAPPENS IN STAGES. CHRIST TAKES HIM ASIDE. IT BECOMES A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, JUST THE TWO OF THEM. HE TOUCHES HIS EARS AND HIS MOUTH AND HE SAYS BE OPENED. THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THOSE FIRST DISCIPLES AND WE SEE IT ALL COME TOGETHER IN TODAY'S STORY.

JESUS ASKS HIS APOSTLES A QUESTION, "WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?" AND THEN ANOTHER, EVEN MORE POINTED QUESTION, "BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" THESE QUESTIONS ARE AT THE VERY HEART OF THE GOSPEL FOR ALL DISCIPLES.

IF YOU TAKE THE GOSPELS AS A WHOLE, THEY GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE OF JESUS AND EXPLAIN HIS MESSAGE; BUT HAVING READ AND BEGUN TO UNDERSTAND ALL THIS INFORMATION ABOUT JESUS HIS QUESTION STILL HANGS IN THE AIR, "WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" IT IS A QUESTION FOR PETER, A QUESTION FOR THE APOSTLES AND IT IS A VERY PERSONAL QUESTION FOR EACH ONE OF US. OF COURSE PETER GIVES THE ABSOLUTELY

RIGHT ANSWER, “YOU ARE THE MESSIAH.”

ONCE AGAIN IMAGINE THE SCENE WITH ME... IT MUST HAVE BEEN A TRULY EXCITING MOMENT FOR THESE DISCIPLES. THEIR MASTER IS NO MERE RABBI; HE IS THE MESSIAH, THE KING OF ISRAEL! AND THEY ARE PART OF HIS INNER CIRCLE, HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS. WOW! WOULD THEY BE MOVING INTO A PALACE? WOULD THEY BE GETTING IMPORTANT JOBS? POWER AND INFLUENCE AND WEALTH - IT WAS AMAZING NEWS.

AND THEN - TOTALLY UNEXPECTED - COMES THE SHOCK. JESUS BEGINS TO TELL THEM WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO HIM, TO THE MESSIAH. HE WILL BE REJECTED BY THE RELIGIOUS AND GOVERNMENT LEADERS OF HIS OWN PEOPLE, HE WILL UNDERGO TERRIBLE SUFFERING ENDING IN HIS HORRIBLE AND SHAMEFUL DEATH ON A CROSS. AND HE WILL RISE ON THE THIRD DAY [WHATEVER THAT MEANS.]

PETER PRESENTS HIS THOUGHTS AND THOSE OF ALL HIS COMPANIONS WHEN HE REBUKES JESUS. HE TAKES HIM ASIDE AND ASKS HIM TO SAY, IT ISN'T SO. BUT JESUS REACTS WITH REAL ANGER. “GET BEHIND ME SATAN.” YOURS ARE HUMAN THOUGHTS, THEY ARE NOT GOD'S WAY OF SEEING THINGS, OF UNDERSTANDING. JESUS REFUSES TO BE TEMPTED TO THINK LIKE PETER. IT IS CLEAR THAT THE DISCIPLES' LESSON AND OUR LEARNING EXPERIENCE AS 21ST CENTURY DISCIPLES IS NOT OVER. IN FACT, FOR THE APOSTLES, THEY HAD REACHED THE CLIMACTIC MOMENT OF KNOWING WHO JESUS WAS; THE MESSIAH, THE CHRIST. BUT NOW THEY HAD TO DISCOVER IN THE MOST PAINFUL WAY JUST WHAT KIND OF MESSIAH HE WAS GOING TO BE.

WE KNOW THIS FROM OUR LEARNING, OUR STUDY OF SCRIPTURE AND FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE IN HUMAN HISTORY BUT THOSE EARLIEST DISCIPLES WON'T KNOW THIS AND THEY WILL NOT SEE ITS TERRIBLE AND FASCINATING BEAUTY UNTIL AFTER THE RESURRECTION. THE REST OF MARK'S GOSPEL DEALS WITH THIS THEME AND YOU AND I ARE

INTENDED TO BE THE REAL LEARNERS.

JESUS HAS NOT FINISHED TODAY'S LESSON. ADDRESSING HIS WORDS NOT ONLY TO THEM BUT TO EVERYONE. "WHOEVER WANTS TO BECOME MY FOLLOWER, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME." JESUS' WAY MUST ALSO BE OUR WAY.

THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION GIVES A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CROSS, OUR CROSS. YES, IT INCLUDES ALL THE SUFFERING THAT IS A NATURAL PART OF LIFE ESPECIALLY WHEN WE EXPERIENCE SICKNESS AND AGING AND GRIEF BUT IT INCLUDES THE DAY TO DAY STRUGGLES WE ALL FACE, THE ARGUMENTS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS, THE DAILY ACHES AND PAINS. SUFFERING TAKES MANY FORMS. AS CHRISTIANS WE REGARD ALL OF THESE AS BEING A PART OF OUR DAILY CROSS AND CONSCIOUSLY UNITE THEM WITH THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST.

IN ANOTHER PART OF THE GOSPEL HE CALLS THIS OUR YOKE AND COMFORTS HIS FOLLOWERS WITH THE WORDS "MY YOKE IS EASY AND MY BURDEN IS LIGHT." BUT HERE WE RECEIVE THE MESSAGE IN PLAIN LANGUAGE. THE GOSPEL DEMANDS NOTHING MORE NOR LESS THAN A LIFETIME OF DEVOTION. TO SAVE OUR LIFE IS TO FOCUS ON OURSELVES AND OUR OWN NEEDS AND OUR POSSESSIONS. TO LOSE OUR LIFE IS TO GIVE IT AWAY - TO LIVE OUR LIVES IN SERVICE TO OTHERS.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE KEY TO A LIFE OF FAITH; OUR FAITH JOURNEY IS NOT TAKEN ALONE. ST. JAMES SAYS IT THIS WAY. "WHAT GOOD IS IT MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IF YOU SAY YOU HAVE FAITH BUT DO NOT HAVE WORKS, WORKS OF CHARITY?" YOU HAVE FAITH AND I HAVE WORKS. SHOW ME YOUR FAITH APART FROM YOUR WORKS AND I, BY MY WORKS WILL SHOW YOU MY FAITH."

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS IS INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND THOSE WE MEET ON OUR EARTHLY JOURNEY.

THIS IS THE PERSPECTIVE WE SHOULD ADOPT AS CHRISTIANS. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO THINK AS GOD DOES. OUR SUFFERINGS AND INDEED OUR HOPES AND OUR JOYS SHOULD BE SEEN THROUGH GOD'S EYES. WHEN WE DO THIS OUR SUFFERING IS MORE BEARABLE AND OUR GREATEST CONCERNS FADE AWAY AND OTHER VALUES BECOME MORE IMPORTANT: FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE ABOVE ALL. IT IS THESE VALUES THAT WILL BRING US FULFILLMENT AND ETERNAL JOY.