

The Beginning of the Good News
A Study of the Gospel of Mark
The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Fall 2015

The Cost of the Cross 8:27-38; 9:30-37; 10:32-45

Some things to think about...

The cross as an instrument of terror in the Roman Empire

Modern Christians must be careful not to spiritualize the otherwise gruesome role of the cross in ancient Roman culture. Jesus was executed in the most barbaric way known by Rome to carry out its "justice" against non-citizens (the sentence was thought to be too harsh for Roman citizens). Crucifixion was a brutal method of execution carried out by nailing a victim to a beam and crossbar, resulting in a slow death by asphyxiation, excruciating pain, exposure to the elements, or shock. It was thought to have a deterrent value by virtue of the protracted, torturous death it produced. Rome used this method of execution to punish acts of sedition against the state, violent crimes, and revolts by slaves.

The *resurrection* of Jesus is God's response to Rome's brutal attempt to do away with him and to scatter his disciples, once and for all. Theological interpretations of the crucifixion, such as comparing Jesus' death to a sacrifice or a ransom paid to deliver a captive, represent the community's ongoing post-resurrection discernment concerning the meaning of both his death and resurrection. In the passages we are studying today, what is uppermost is the disciples' fear and difficulty in understanding the implications *for them* in following the Messiah all the way to the cross.

Why does Jesus tell people NOT to disclose that he is the Jewish Messiah?

After Peter identifies Jesus as Messiah (8:29), Jesus "sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him" (8:30). This is not the first occurrence of this instruction. Over the first eight chapters of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus often tells people not to reveal his identity as Messiah or to tell others about his miraculous feedings, healings, or exorcisms. Scholars have long debated without consensus the reasons for this appeal to secrecy by Jesus in what has become known as the "Messianic Secret" in the Gospel of Mark.

At least one aspect of the messianic secret seems clear: the messianic status of Jesus cannot be understood apart from his suffering and death on the cross. His horrific execution at the hands of the Romans did not fit with any messianic expectation among the Jews of his day who expected God to send a messiah to set the world right and inaugurate the reign of God in the world. Jews were not of one mind on this topic: some expected a powerful military ruler or king to cast off Roman oppression; others a priest to reform the Temple hierarchy; yet others a great prophet in the tradition of Moses or Elijah. No one in the first-century world of Judaism, however, expected a *suffering* messiah who would be *executed* by Rome

and then rise from the dead. So, with regard to the “Messianic Secret,” Jesus may be anticipating that his proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God might lead to suffering and death at the hands of Rome. He may be warning people not to publicize his powerful acts of ministry, lest his actions *confirm* their *erroneous* expectations that he is a powerful messiah from God. Only at the foot of the cross near the end of the story is Jesus’ messianic status fully made known in the world.

Attending to the Word...

Read the first passage and in your own words explain why Peter rebukes Jesus. Why does Jesus call Peter “Satan”? According to Jesus, how will Peter escape the clutches of Satan? What are some ways for us to resist Satan and respond to Jesus?

Notice in the first passage that Peter employs a strategy still present in today’s world: he pulls Jesus aside from the group to have a private conversation, with the expectation of changing Jesus’ mind to see things as Peter sees them. What is Jesus’ response to Peter’s strategy for communication and persuasion? What does this suggest about Jesus’ approach to communication in the community?

We hypothesized in the Introduction that Mark’s community was experiencing brutal persecution at the hands of the Romans. Some members of Mark’s community or their family members may have even suffered a martyr’s death for refusing to recant their faith in Jesus. With this background, reread 8:34-38 and explain this teaching of Jesus.

In 9:30-37 Jesus once again predicts his own death. In what ways this time do the disciples misunderstand his teaching and their own responsibilities? According to Jesus, what characterizes some of the duties of a follower of the Messiah?

For a third time, Jesus predicts his suffering and death in 10:32-45. What is the nature of the disciples’ misunderstanding this time? What do they expect from being followers of the Jewish Messiah? Why do you think “the ten...began to be angry with James and John” (10:41) for seeking this special privilege from Jesus? Why do you think the disciples are having such a hard time with the teaching of Jesus?

Making the Word your own...

Being a faithful disciple sometimes requires us to change one of our expectations or goals in life. Briefly describe a time in your own life when God called you to make such a change.

Can you tell a story about a time when someone (maybe even you!) was tempted to have a private conversation with a church leader in the hopes of persuading that leader to see an issue your way? What was the result or outcome?

Why do we sometimes seek to leave other stakeholders out of the conversation?

Are there some areas of life in the church where you see particular “privileges” afforded to people involved in leadership, or to people having status and power in the community? According to Jesus and the way of the cross, how should we respond? Why is it so hard to resist the temptation to seek privilege and status?

Do you or your congregation have a practice or discipline that helps you determine whether you are “setting your mind on” divine things or human things? Explain.