

[Jeremiah 11:18-20](#)

[Psalm 1](#)

[James 3: 13 – 18](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

September 22, 2024

Sermon: **WALKING IN THE LIGHT**

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Summary: Embrace the journey.

In our lectionary reading from last week that Jim discussed, Jesus had led his disciples up north to Caesarea Philippi from his home country of Galilee, and it was there, away both from the enthusiastic crowds that followed him everywhere and from the growing wariness and suspicion, even the growing opposition of the religious authorities who had begun to grasp the threat he posed to their established ways of life and thinking, that he had achieved the decisive turning point of his ministry, the explicit acknowledgement from Simon Peter, the spokesman for all the disciples, that he, Jesus, was the Messiah, the long awaited Son of God.

From that point on, the nature of his ministry completely changed. Both the enthusiastic crowds and the religious authorities had demonstrated an inability to appreciate the true profundity of what he represented; and from that point on, right up to the end, his primary focus became his small band of followers, those who would be entrusted to carry the gospel into the world, once he, Jesus, had left it, and returned to the Father.

And yet, if anything, the challenge for our Lord now became even greater. And in our reading for today, we begin to appreciate both the nature and the difficulty of that challenge. But what is of paramount importance for each of us is to recognize and always remember, is that we are every bit in need of that same

instruction. The gospel accounts are not simply recorded history; they have spiritual reality. They are the very Word of God speaking to us, with the same urgency and the same promise of eternal benefit that Christ, in person, brought to His small band of original followers.

So with that in mind, let's read what Jesus had to say to them, as he began to lead them south towards Jerusalem, and towards the Cross.

Our passage is from the 9<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark, and runs from verse 30-37. We'll take it in parts, and begin with verses 30-31.

As he had done not long before in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus repeats here that he will be delivered into the hands of men, who will kill him, and after three days he will rise again. But again, Mark tells us, they did not understand him. The thing they did not understand was when he said that he would die and rise again, and yet the words are as clear as words can be. What does that tell us about them, and about us?

I think the answer lies in what Mark adds, that they were *afraid* to ask him what it meant.

They were like people who knew so much that they were afraid to know more. And isn't that a characteristic we can recognize in ourselves?

The human mind has an amazing faculty for rejecting what it does not wish to see. My own sister was diagnosed with a glioblastoma of the brain a while back, a condition in which there is very little chance of long-term survival. After she passed away a year or so later, my brother-in-law told me that during that last year, they almost never even mentioned what was likely to happen, never sought to prepare for the end, never pressed her doctors for details, never sought to understand or come to grips with what was happening. The thought of her death was simply something they could not entertain.

And couldn't many of us say the same about our spiritual lives? Over and over again, we have heard the Christian message. We know the glory of accepting it and the tragedy of rejecting it, but many of us are just as far off as ever we were from giving it our full allegiance and moulding our lives to fit it. We still accept the parts of the Christian message which we like and which suit us, and refuse to understand the rest.

We have heard the truth, but the truth has not set us free, because we refuse to know the truth, to follow the truth wherever it leads.

But let us continue, with verses 32-37, and in them we find an illustration of the same failure, in the disciples then, and perhaps in ourselves now.

Nothing could better show how far the disciples were from truly understanding what Jesus has just told them. Instead of growing in the new reality of their lives that Jesus has just revealed, they instead are still thinking of his Kingdom in earthly terms, and of themselves as his chief ministers of state. There is something almost heart-breaking in the thought of Jesus going towards a cross while his disciples are arguing among themselves about who would be greatest.

Yet in their heart of hearts they knew they were wrong. When he asked them what they had been arguing about, they fell silent; they had nothing to say; it was the silence of shame.

And that, I think brings it to another point of application for all of us. There is an old saying that we should lead our lives as if our mother was standing by us, watching. Well, that old saying, as old sayings often do, points to a spiritual reality. For it is a Christian truth – one we all profess to believe – that Jesus is in fact standing next to us, watching us, and ready to help us. Yet how many of us, professing that truth with our mouths, live out that truth with our lives?

If we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus, for most of us it would make all the difference in the world. If of everything we did, we asked *Could I be doing this if Jesus were watching me*; if of everything we said, we asked *Could I go on talking like this if Jesus were listening to me?*, there would surely be many things all of us would be saved from doing and saying.

But the lesson goes even deeper than that, as our reading illustrates. Jesus took this failure on the part of his disciples to truly incorporate the truth into their lives very seriously. He called the Twelve to them and sat down. When a Rabbi had something of importance to teach his pupils, he always sat down to teach. So we know that what follows is of utmost importance. And what Jesus tells them is that, if they truly sought greatness in His kingdom they must find it, not by being first, but by being last, not by being servants, but by serving.

And then he illustrates his instruction by taking a little child – a *little* child, Mark emphasizes, because that's important – and sets it in their midst. A little child cannot help *us*, cannot give *us* things; it is the other way around. A little child *needs* things *from* us; a little child must have things done for *it*.

So Jesus is saying is, If you welcome the poor, the ordinary people who have no influence and no wealth and no power, who have nothing to give *you*, you are

welcoming me. More than that, you are welcoming God Himself. And what he means by that is that your spirit is coming into conformity with Christ's spirit, which is itself the spirit of God. As Jesus put it elsewhere, "[I] did not come to be served, but to serve." (Matthew 20: 28)

But the lesson of our passage is deeper than that. It is not simply that we should help the poor and the neglected and the otherwise helpless; that we should seek the company of those who need our help rather than of those who can help us; that the real treasures are those we pile up in heaven rather than in our bank accounts, Those are, of course, important Christian truths, and their importance has spread out from Christianity to effect many other religious and moral and even political systems.

But the true profundity of what Christ is teaching lies, as always, not just in the practical moral instruction, but in the truths he reveals about the actual nature of spiritual reality, the reality of heaven, its laws, its principles, and its standards.

So many of us, yours truly included, when we engage in acts of charity, when we give alms to the poor or provide help to the helpless, do so with the hope, whether we acknowledge it in so many words to ourselves or not, with the hope and expectation of getting something in return. That something could be as subtle as the admiration we hope to get from others for being such a good person; or as material as heavenly congratulation and status.

But whether subtle or otherwise, good deeds done with *any* sort of expectation of reward are a failure to manifest fully the spirit of Christ, who told us explicitly:

*Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them...but when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; that your charitable deed may be in secret.*

Words can't be any clearer than that; and yet the ideal they represent should keep us all mindful of how we all fall short.

The truth is, and it's the hardest truth of all for us to incorporate into our thinking and our lives, is that the Christian way is a difficult journey, through a narrow gate, towards an unreachable goal, because it is not a matter of behaving in a certain way or doing certain things, it's a journey of transformation of the human spirit into a likeness of the Spirit of Christ, and that is a journey along which even the saints among us have only taken the first faltering steps.

And speaking of infancy, let's return to our reading. Mark is careful to tell us that Jesus didn't just set a child in the midst of these big rough men and point to it;

Jesus embraced the little child in the crook of his arm, no doubt sitting on his lap, and said *Whoever receives one little child like this in my name receives me.*

I think we all know – even an old crank like me – we all know the pure, unadulterated pleasure of holding a baby in your arms. The pleasure, the joy, of doing so doesn't depend on somebody else noticing us, it doesn't depend on word getting out that we like babies, it doesn't depend on anything that will come after we have set the baby down. It is pure, exquisite in-the-moment joy, complete in itself.

On the last night of his life, Jesus told his followers: *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Not the one who serves, but the one whose joy in service is pure, exquisite and in the moment, complete in itself.

And so, heavenly father, that is our prayer for this message, that we may day by day grow ever more faithful in service to others and to you, which is a movement away from the limelights of the world, and into the joy of our Lord, who said, *I am the light of the world, and in whose name we pray.*