

The Way of the Cross

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

Date: 6 March 2022; 1st Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Colossians 3:1-14; Mark 9:14-50

This year we've been reading through the Gospel according to Mark together as a church. As we've journeyed through Mark, Jesus keeps raising controversial topics that confront a Western worldview. Today we meet another controversial topic - Hell. In our text today Jesus says,

if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell¹

Many people find the idea of Hell outdated and cruel. "How could a loving God send people to Hell?" Maybe that's a question you've had. What are we to make of Jesus' words in Mark 9? We'll come to that later, but, for the moment let's focus on the main thread of this text.

You remember the 3 main themes in Mark. Who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to follow Jesus? In chapter 8 Peter Jesus is the Christ. And Jesus says what this means - that he must suffer, die and rise again. Then Jesus says what it means to follow him - to deny yourself and to take up your cross. Peter, James and John see Jesus in his glory on the mountain. We pick up the story as they come down and rejoin the other disciples in the reality of the day to day. Mark chapter 9 records a number of different episodes where the disciples struggle to work out just what it means to follow Jesus. We're looking at this chapter from their perspective. I've called this sermon, *The Way of the Cross*, because through each of these episodes Jesus teaches them, and us too, what it means to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. This is the texture of the Christian life. Just as the cross is at the centre of who Jesus is and what he came to do, so the cross determines who we are to be as followers of Christ. So where are we going today? We'll look at 3 points.

1. Help my unbelief, 14-29
2. The servant of all, 30-41
3. Causing to stumble, 42-50

1. Help my unbelief (14-29)

In our first episode today, verses 14-29, we meet a man whose son is possessed by an evil spirit. The man comes to Jesus because, he tells us, the disciples have not been able to drive the spirit out.

"You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

And we wonder, is Jesus talking about the disciples or about the crowd, or both?

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

¹ Mark 9.47

In desperation, or is it hoping against hope the father says to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Just as an aside, I love this honesty from this dad. The Greek is more succinct: “I believe; help my unbelief!” It’s one of the most honest prayers in the Bible. It’s so often where we find ourselves. We’d love to believe. Jesus, God in the flesh. Forgiveness of sins, even mine. A kingdom of true justice and peace. Life eternal. Seeing God, face to face. And yet, it’s just, well, so difficult to believe. Could it be true? How could it be true? In a superb essay on faith, Pope Benedict argues that “There is no escape from the dilemma of being [human].”² Just as the believer’s temptation is doubt, so the doubter’s temptation is belief. Is that you? Wanting to believe, but not sure you can? Stuck in the mess of life? Why not join this man in his prayer. “I believe. Help my unbelief!” Just as Jesus heard his prayer, he will hear yours.

Back to the story. Jesus commands the demon to go. With a shriek it leaves, and Jesus lifts the boy up, and gives him back to his father, as if back from the dead. But now we come to the disciples. Earlier Jesus asked them, “What are you arguing with [the crowd] about?” And now we learn the answer.

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” **29** He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

It’s that they couldn’t drive the demon out. The disciples are shocked. Back in chapter 6 he had sent them out and they had driven out many demons. Why can’t they do it this time? And we wonder about Jesus’ answer. Of course they can only come out by prayer! What else can we do in that situation?! At this point I’m reminded that faith, belief and trust are all the same word in Greek. Was it that the disciples were trying to drive the demon out in their own strength, rather than trusting in Jesus? Were they resting on their past success, thinking it was by their authority, and not his? Was it not just the man, but they also who needed help with unbelief?

Isn’t this a temptation for us too as followers of Christ? To rest on our past experience, our past success, and to not trust Jesus? To think it is because of my power, my strength, my ability? It is the temptation to forget God. The temptation of unbelief. We would be fools to think we could drive out demons apart from prayer, and earnest prayer at that! But that only serves to highlight the point. The man’s prayer is always a prayer for followers of Christ, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Help me not rely on myself, but to deny myself and trust in you Jesus. This is the way of the cross.

2. The Servant of all (30-41)

Jesus retreats from the crowds to teach his disciples. And what does he teach them?

“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius, 2004: 45

It's the second time he's told them, but again, they don't understand, and Mark says, they, "were afraid to ask him about it." They come back to Jesus' home base in Galilee, Peter's house in Capernaum, which, incidentally, you can still see there. Jesus asks them an awkward question. "What were you arguing about on the road?" They were arguing with the crowd, now with each other, but they're all a little sheepish.

34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. We can imagine Peter telling Mark this story, saying, "Yep. That was really awkward."

Jesus has just told them that as the Son of Man, he is going to suffer and die. The Son of Man is how Jesus refers to himself. It's taken from Daniel 7, where God gives this figure all power and authority and his kingdom will have no end. The disciples are focussed on the power and glory. They want to be up there as the greatest, just under Jesus on the throne. They don't understand the upside down nature of Jesus' kingdom. So,

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Jesus' power and glory as the Son of Man, are in fact seen in the weakness and humiliation of the cross. And to be a disciple means to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus. That means it's not about being the greatest. It's about being the last. It's about being the servant of all, because of course Jesus himself came, not to be served, but to serve.

To drive the point home, Jesus takes a child. Then as now, children are not the great and powerful and important. But not so in God's eyes. Jesus puts the child in the centre, takes the child in his arms and says,

Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

What an incredible affirmation of children! To welcome a child in Jesus' name is to welcome Jesus and God himself. This is why we have Kids Church. This is why we love having kids at church, because God loves them. But for the disciples the point is this - just because they're following Jesus doesn't make them important and great. Jesus identifies himself with children. Are we looking to serve them and in doing so serve Christ himself?

The disciples still don't get it. Perhaps stung by their recent failure John asks Jesus,

"Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

The Greek for this sentence literally reads, "we told him to stop, because he was not *following us*." Wait a second. Shouldn't John have said, "because he wasn't following *you Jesus*"? That subtle shift exposes what is really going on in his heart, and maybe the others too. They are Jesus' inner circle. Who are these outsiders? What right do they have to drive out demons? It's just a variation on their argument about who is the greatest. They're more concerned about defending their patch than Jesus and his kingdom. They've missed the bigger picture. People being freed from Satan's power!

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, **40** for whoever is not against us is for us.

The way of the cross is not about defending our little tribes as Christians or being in the inner circle. It’s about the kingdom of God breaking in. If people do good in Jesus’ name, then chances are they are honouring him. The disciples and us too are tempted by pride, and its shadow, insecurity. We try and achieve status, we’re anxious to be recognised, to be close to power. The way of the cross is to deny yourself. It’s not about being the greatest. It’s about being a servant. It’s about following Jesus, the servant of all. It’s about welcoming the least, and finding that we ourselves are welcomed.

The way of the cross means trusting in Jesus, not yourself. The way of the cross means not being the greatest, but being the servant. And the way of the cross means a concern for others and for your own self. That brings us to point 3.

3. Causing to stumble (42-50)

In these verses Jesus confronts us with the destruction self centredness brings. Let’s take each point in turn. Just as Jesus had taken a child in his arms to welcome them, now he issues a stern warning.

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. (42)

These are perhaps the strongest words Jesus utters in all the Gospels. I am so conscious of this verse when I consider the church’s failures. Actually it’s not just the church, every institution in our society with children under its care has been shown to have failed to protect children from abusers. I’m so thankful for the Royal Commission and the changes it has brought in safeguarding children and vulnerable people across our society. I’m thankful for the Safe Church training and protocols that we have in the Anglican church in Tasmania because we want to do all we can to protect children and vulnerable people. It has been a privilege to meet with people who have experienced trauma to try and help them experience the love and grace of God. I’ve wept with and for them. And I feel deep anger over what they have suffered. Jesus’ words here are a reminder of just how much God values children, and just how concerned he is for their safety. In this life justice is so often not done, and what justice we do see is sadly imperfect. Jesus’ words are a promise that one day perfect justice will be done. God will hold to account people who harm little ones.

But Jesus also has a warning for each of us against harming our own souls.

*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. **45** And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. **47** And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, **48** where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.”*

At last we come to Jesus' teaching on Hell. What are we to make of this? First, it should be abundantly clear from what we have just seen, that hell is not an arbitrary punishment by a capricious God. No, hell is about the justice of God. It is the consequence of God's righteous anger against those who would harm the creation that he loves. It is his just punishment for such wickedness. This is something that we in Western culture find hard to grasp. The idea that there is an objective moral standard to which we will be held accountable cuts across our idol of freedom. We want justice for those wicked people, but not for me. It's all too easy to justify ourselves by saying "Thank God I'm not like them."

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winning Russian novelist, once wrote,

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Jesus says, we cannot be too careful with our own souls. There are things in our hearts that turn us away from God and towards death and nothingness. For that is what Hell is, to be cut off from the source of life and to be left to disintegrate in the mess of our own self absorption. Left unchecked they will fester and grow and destroy us and the world around us. Radical surgery is needed.

God offers us life in Jesus' name. But that invitation is also a call to leave the prison of our own selfishness. In this life we always feel the pull away from God and back to nothingness and death. We have to consciously choose life over death, to deny ourselves and follow Christ over trying to gain the whole world. Our reading from Colossians puts it like this.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Put to death. It's strong language. No less strong are Jesus' words.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell.

Jesus overstates things to make the point. Do all you can to avoid falling for temptation. Practically what does this mean? First, know your weaknesses. Don't put yourself in places where you know you'll be tempted and you won't be able to resist. Take steps to safeguard your heart. For example, if porn is a problem for you, install accountability software on all your computers and devices. Second, replace your temptations with godly pursuits. It's not so much about trying not to sin, as seeking to grow in the new life that God has called you to in Jesus. As Paul writes,

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Just as we do all we can to protect and care for the vulnerable, so we need to do all we can to protect and care for our own hearts.

The way of the cross means trusting in Christ and not ourselves. "I believe. Lord, help my unbelief." The way of the cross means not seeking power or position, but being the servant, even as Christ himself came to serve you and me. The way of the cross means not causing others or ourselves to

stumble, taking drastic measures to guard little ones and guard our hearts. What drastic measures do you need to take to walk in the way of the cross?