

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B)

15<sup>th</sup> September 2024

'Mark's Gospel: the turning point'

Is 50: *I offered my back to those who struck me  
the snares of death ...* James 2: *I will prove to you that I have faith by showing  
you my good deeds.* Ps 114: *They surrounded me,  
Mk 8: 27–35: 'You are the Christ' ... He must suffer  
many things, ... be rejected, ... be killed*

We have that saying, don't we? "2 steps forward, 1 step back" to describe how progress — or just our life — isn't always unfalteringly positive. We make an advance, then we fall back; we have a success, followed quickly by a failure or slip-up. To me, that phrase sums up this Gospel occasion, when St Peter takes, exactly, '2 steps forward, 1 step back': he first offers that incredible spiritual insight into Jesus's person, "*You are the Christ!*", only to contradict Jesus two minutes later and oppose His intended path to the Passion and the Cross. St Peter, and all the Apostles, and the wider group of disciples, did struggle to comprehend the message of Jesus at first. It's no surprise: the ministry of the Son of God incarnate in the world was a brand new thing, an unexpected initiative of God, despite all the centuries of its preparation in Jewish history.

Mk 8, the chapter in which is recounted this occasion at the remote spot of Caesarea Philippi — way

away from the main centres of Jewish population — is the *centre-piece* of the Gospel of St Mark, the mid-point or 'turning point' of the whole Gospel, you might say. Prior to this, the apostles have been exposed to Jesus's teaching and His miracles, the healings and the controversies, and they have been coming to appreciate what an extraordinary character they have allied themselves with ... but they have not (yet) been put 'on the spot' with having to state categorically who He is. That all changes, here, in Mk 8, the mid-point of the Gospel. Jesus *does* now put them 'on the spot,' but not in the limelight, not in public, not in Capernaum or anywhere near the lakeside towns of their origin or families. In fact, this takes place up in the foothills of Mt Hermon, some 30 miles north of Lake Galilee — then a Roman settlement called Caesarea Philippi, also called *Banias*, a mystical spot with scenic pools and caves. Here they can speak their mind, with no-one to eavesdrop on them, spy, or report to the Pharisees their conversations. Jesus gives them leave to be open with Him. We know well the dialogue, don't we: His first

asking who ‘Others’ are suggesting that He is — and they offer various vague replies to do with some return in the spirit of the prophets of old — but then He makes it personal, asking them directly who ‘You’ (the Apostles) say He is. In this place of privacy, and freedom, St Peter is able to offer the opinion that is, surely, the joint opinion of them all, that He is, in fact, “the Christ,” that is, the long-prophesied and longed-for *Messiah* of Jewish expectation. It is a bold statement that Peter makes! Imagine, he is daring to suggest that here, before them, is the One whom Isaiah, 8 centuries before, had first spoken of! This is no anodyne, everyday, or throw-away statement. It is the *key point of the whole Gospel*, its very meaning. No wonder St Mark (and indeed St Matthew also in his Gospel) makes this episode the centre-piece of his text. Jesus is *the Christ*, and in fact “the Son of the Living God” as Peter expands on in St Matthew’s text. This revelation isn’t just the ‘turning point’ of the Gospel, but the turning point of all human history, even of *all Creation’s history*: this Jesus of Nazareth is *God Himself*, entered into the world for its

salvation, restoration, and re-creation. ‘2 steps forward’ would be an understatement, wouldn’t it? St Peter has given voice to the very mystery at the heart of all reality, that “*God so loved the world that He sent His only Son.*”

But it isn’t the whole lesson of this episode at Caesarea Philippi, is it? Jesus tells them *not* to spread it abroad, who He is. Not for now. Why is that? Is not this the ‘Good News’ for which the whole of humanity is waiting? Well, yes, it is, but we quickly discover that even the Apostles — even St Peter — don’t yet get a half of it. They can’t start their preaching ministry when they haven’t grasped the entirety of Jesus’s message and mission. So it is that St Peter then manages to take his ‘1 step back,’ *arguing* with Jesus and contradicting what He goes on to say. He doesn’t yet realise that his acknowledging Jesus to be ‘the Christ’ has to be understood in the context of what will happen to Him when they eventually get to Jerusalem. Jesus won’t go on to military or political victory against the Romans and their collaborators; he won’t be ousting the oppressors and winning some royal conquest.

Whatever the common understanding or expectation of the role of the Messiah, Jesus was probably going to be surprising them: His was, as indeed a close reading of Scripture indicated (e.g. 1<sup>st</sup> Reading today from Is 50), a Messiahship of *service and of suffering*. It was all there in the Old Testament prophecies, as Jesus would go on to explain to them, but for now they were still looking for some sort of a *conquest*. No wonder, then, when Jesus was only offering an outcome of “*suffer[ing] grievously, ... reject[ion] by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and [being] put to death*” St Peter balked, and resisted, and denied that this could possibly be the right path for Jesus. This is his ‘1 step back,’ his reversing the progress he’d made, though not undoing it. It’s just hard for him, and for the others, to comprehend. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour, in fact the “Son of the living God” — and, yes, it is also true that He must suffer grievously, be rejected, and put to death. Seeming contradictions? — one a glorious majesty, the other an abject failure ... and yet *not* in the mind of Christ: God’s way, not man’s.

Last Sunday we were presented with the deaf-and-dumb man whom Jesus cured, opening up his ears to hear the Word, and his mouth to (go on) to proclaim that same saving Word. The very first words we heard this Sunday in the readings were “*The Lord has opened my ear*” — maybe that’s no coincidence, but intended by those who put together the lectionary. We need to have our ears attuned to the Lord, to that *suffering-servant text* from Isaiah prophesying clearly Our Lord’s own teaching at Caesarea Philippi which *surprised but prepared* the Apostles for what was going to come:

“For my part I made no resistance, neither did I turn away. I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle. The Lord comes to my help ...” (Is 50: 5–7).

This is *God’s way, not man’s*, that Jesus is having to remind the Apostles of, and re-communicate to all His followers; it is the Way of the *Cross*, and not the Way of Vengeance and Retaliation. It is the lesson we all need to learn; the lesson we all need to *re-learn* as our Christian

life develops and matures: to renounce oneself, take up one's Cross, and follow Jesus despite the hardships. This is not a paltry or insignificant thing. In fact, it demands one's whole life's effort, doesn't it? — to accept the hardships, to align them with the straight *Way of the Cross* of Jesus, and not to deviate in fruitless by-ways of selfishness, slavishness, irritation or retaliation.

What are the sufferings of this time for you? Large or small ... name them ... name them now quietly before Jesus. Maybe they are principally of our own making; or maybe they are caused partially or mostly by others. Maybe it's all a bit confused, and you're struggling to see the plan of God in this. Align your suffering, your confusion, your struggle, with Jesus. Don't expect Him suddenly to mount His royal throne and defeat your enemies with one fatal blow. He may prefer for now just to walk with you the royal road to Calvary: He may prefer to carry the Cross alongside you, sharing the burden, rather than suddenly to 'magic' it away — that is more likely His way: God's way, not man's.

St Peter and the others learnt gradually to take those steps with Jesus. For them it was sometimes '2 steps forward, 1 step back' as they only slowly understood His ways; and maybe it will be the same for us. But for sure we have to be on the path with Him, the same path He laid out for the Apostles, even when it demands more than we bargained for, and even when it demanded His walking with us in some hardship or other. But what He never ever said was that He would leave us unaccompanied. He said just the opposite: "*I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.*" But this can only work out well, as He would wish, when we first recognize Him with total conviction, as St Peter did, as "*the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" Only by handing over our life to Jesus as our Saviour, allowing Him *and asking Him* to guide our lives completely, can we make sense of this life. Let's be sure to take our steps only with Him, having Him ahead of us, or beside us, but always with us. Don't leave His path, and don't let Him out of your sight! *He has kept my soul from death ... I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living!*