

**Sermon for Romsey Uniting Church**  
**8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2009**

**Mark 8:31-38**

Today's reading, like the story of the Transfiguration that we heard a fortnight ago, comes from the centre of the Gospel of Mark. Brendan Byrne, who taught me the Gospel of Mark, says that there are three stories in the gospel. Story One asks the question who Jesus is. We know, because we've read the opening line of the gospel: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But the disciples and the crowds don't, and through the first half of the gospel they are asking who this person with power and authority could be. The answer is that he's the Messiah. Story Two then asks what sort of Messiah Jesus will be. The second half of the gospel shows Jesus teaching his disciples that as Messiah he must suffer, be rejected, be put to death, and on the third day rise again. For the disciples this second story, about suffering and death, conflicts with the first. The two stories clash on the cross, when Jesus is taunted by the crowds who call: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." These two apparently contradictory stories are resolved in the third story, which sees Jesus, the crucified messiah, as the Son of Man who returns in glory.

So, today's reading comes from the moment in the gospel when Mark's Story One is replaced by his Story Two. The disciples now know what we readers have known from the beginning: who Jesus is. Peter has just answered Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?" by saying "You are the Messiah". What the disciples don't yet know is what sort of Messiah Jesus will be: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly." Jesus' public ministry in Galilee is finished; he has begun his journey towards Jerusalem and his death, and along the way he will teach his disciples that he has come "to serve and give his life as a ransom for many".<sup>1</sup> It's a difficult teaching; and today we see Peter stumble at it. The disciples will continue to have difficulty with what sort of Messiah Jesus is right until the end.

In today's reading, Jesus not only speaks quite openly about his own suffering. He also speaks quite openly about the suffering that those who follow him can expect. And he doesn't limit this teaching to the disciples who have already chosen to follow him. He calls to the crowds, and speaks to them too when he talks about those who want to become his followers carrying their cross and losing their life. It's pretty much the exact opposite of any modern evangelical strategy. Rather than telling the crowds that following him will make their lives better in any way, Jesus speaks of judicial execution. The cross was an instrument of torturous death used to keep the population subdued under Roman rule. Carrying one's cross was literally what criminals and slaves had to do as they went to their place of execution. Who would follow a Messiah whose followers risked crucifixion? And yet Jesus spoke openly about suffering and death, and not just his own, but the suffering and death of those who want to follow him.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Over the past week this saying has been mixing in my head with a book I'm reading for Lent on the recommendation of Sharon Hollis, who's in charge of Continuing Education at the Theological College. The book is called *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, and it was written by Miroslav Volf, a professor at Yale Divinity School, for the Archbishop of Canterbury's 2006 Lenten study. I haven't finished it yet, but I want to share what I've read so far, because what Volf says about who our life belongs to has tied in so well for me with Jesus' saying about saving and losing our life.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:45.

Basically, Volf points out, our lives are not our own. Everything we are and everything we have come from God.<sup>2</sup> Our very existence is a gift from God; the breath in our lungs, the creation story in Genesis tells us, is a gift. In Corinthians Paul asks: “What do you have that you did not receive?”<sup>3</sup> and the answer is, nothing. All things are from God and through God. And yet as human beings we want to be independent of God. We want to stand on our own two feet and make something of ourselves. But we can’t both affirm that God is the creator of everything and at the same time say that we are independent of Him. If we say that our lives and our skills are our own, we wrong the God who gave them to us. Asserting our independence, taking pride in our achievements, feeling entitled, claiming an absolute right to dispose of our possessions, these things contradict who we actually are in God. To be true to who we have been created to be is to recognise that we are dependent on God for our very breath. This is Volf’s argument in the first part of his book.

So, when I read “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it,” while also reading *Free of Charge*, what I thought was: Those who believe that their lives belong to them, that they’re independent and self-made, will lose their lives. Those who recognise that their lives aren’t their own; that everything they have and everything they are comes from God, will save their lives. Because living one way is to deny who God is, and living the other way is to live in relationship with God.

If our lives aren’t our own; if everything we are and have comes from God, how should we live? Volf says that gifts from God come with obligations. They’re gifts given to us freely, for no other reason than that we exist and God loves us, but that doesn’t mean that we’re not called to respond to them. Volf suggests that there are four things that we are obliged to do in response to God’s gifts. The first obligation is to receive the gifts, to come to God with empty hands recognising that God will fill them, to recognise that we cannot earn God’s gifts or negotiate with God for them. This is faith. The second obligation is gratitude. God has given us gifts because God loves us. As with any gift we receive with gratitude. The third and fourth obligations we have recognise *why* God gives us gifts. God gives us gifts so we can exist and flourish, but God also gives us gifts so that we can help others exist and flourish. So God’s gifts call us to be available for God to work in and through us; and they call us to participate in God’s giving, as we share our gifts with others. Faith; gratitude; availability; participation. These are the ways we called to respond to God.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Volf writes: “The self will lose itself if it simply lives in and for itself. It will seek only its own benefits, and the more it seeks its own benefit, the less satisfied it will become.”<sup>4</sup> When Christ calls us to deny ourselves, he frees us from focusing purely on ourselves, and opens us up to live in two directions: towards God, to receive good things in faith, and towards our neighbour, to pass them on in love.

This is what today’s gospel passage says to me. It says that we should lose our lives, by recognising that they are not our own in the first place. It says we then save our lives, when we accept them from God’s hands as gift.

I don’t know whether the connection I’ve made between today’s gospel passage and my Lenten reading makes sense to you. I don’t know whether it will still make sense to me at the end of Lent, when I’ve read the whole book! But I wanted to share it with you, because the recognition that my life doesn’t belong to me but is pure and absolute gift, suddenly made a whole new sense of Jesus’ saying about discipleship. And the reminder that everything I have comes from God makes not buying books for Lent so that I could share my wealth with other people seem much less of a hardship. I don’t know whether it has the same affect on you, but I wanted to offer you the suggestion this morning.

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:7.

<sup>4</sup> Volf, p. 52.