

Sermon for Sunday, March 5, 2012 Mark 8:31-38 "Be Careful What You Wish For"

Up until the moment of today's gospel passage, the evangelist Mark lays out a picture of a powerful Jesus, preaching and teaching and healing all over the Galilee. No wonder, then, that just before this passage, Peter responds to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am," by responding "You are the Messiah." Of course he is the Messiah. Who else could do what Jesus has done?

And this sense that Jesus was the Messiah was not just something that Jesus' disciples were pondering – the news of his miracles had spread throughout the area and beyond. How the people of Israel must have been excited by the news of this Rabbi and his shocking words and gifts for healing! They must have thought "Finally we get the one we've wished for, the one we've prayed for, the one who can rescue us from our miserable lives, oppressed by the Roman emperor who considered himself a god, confused by the different religious leaders who are just as political as the Roman emperor. At last, someone who can save us."

Peter got it right. The people who heard of the miracles were right. Jesus was indeed the promised one, the Messiah. They got their wish.

But the old saying is right: be careful what you wish for. You might get it.

Yes, this was the promised Messiah, this carpenter's son from Nazareth. A wish, a prayer, fulfilled.

But what did Jesus promise? No sooner than Peter had identified Jesus as the Messiah, than Jesus told him, and the rest of the disciples what that really meant.

It meant that Jesus would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders, and be killed, and then rise again after three days.

Not quite what the disciples expected.

I wonder if those disciples thought that Jesus would banish the Romans, crush them as he had crushed the physical and mental ailments of so many, out-argue the religious leaders, sit on a throne of glory, and they would be his princes, sitting by him and enjoying riches and power and pleasure beyond anything they could imagine.

Instead Jesus was telling them that he was destined to die an ignominious death, broken, scorned. No king of earthly glory. No princehoods. No thumbing their noses at the Romans and the Pharisees and all those who made life difficult in first century Israel. Not a glorious King, but a broken body, bleeding, on a wooden cross.

Was this what they had left their families, their fishing boats, their relatively comfortable lives for? It seemed incomprehensible. How could the man who could drive out demons, heal unimaginable disease and even death, who could win an argument with those scribes and Pharisees, how could this man be killed? It was ridiculous...but this was what he was saying.

His message was plain: if you want to follow me, you have to be prepared for what will come. It will not be princehoods. It will not be earthly glory or wealth. It will mean pain and loss and death.

Not what would encourage them, to be sure, but an important message. They needed to know what they were getting themselves into, and perhaps all the healings and such had distracted them from the work at hand. Perhaps they thought that this would all be about the adulation of the crowd.

They would have to do what he did, to commit to following no matter what the cost – and there would be a cost – and it might well end badly.

And yet, there was also a promise of something wonderful, just not the kind of thing that they had been thinking of. There would be glory, but it would not be an earthly glory, and it would not be immediate.

Deferred gratification. I doubt the disciples were any better at it than we are.

Be careful what you wish for – you might get it. The disciples wished for a king, a messiah. They got it. But the Messiah they got was not necessarily what they expected. Sure, he had the power to heal the sick and to outreach anyone anywhere. But the work that he was on earth to do was not about getting crowns of laurels here on earth...no, he was intended to wear a crown of thorns here on earth. The crown of crowns wouldn't come until later.

Yes, Jesus was quite clear about the cost of discipleship: you follow me, you risk all, because this is about your soul, not about your personal aggrandizement. But the corollary is an equally important one for us to remember: you follow Jesus, you don't get a free ride from the troubles of this earth.

I think of this often when I am with someone who is suffering. Occasionally a relative may say "Why is my loved one suffering so? He has always been such a good Christian. It doesn't seem fair...why do good people have to suffer?"

And once again, I hear Jesus' words: "take up your cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

We are not promised a trouble-free life if we are followers of Christ. In fact, we are promised our earthly life will not be easy. Christians don't get a free ride. Sounds like bad news, doesn't it? But along with the suffering comes a second promise: follow Christ, and you will be blessed by him when he comes "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Those of us who suffer are not being punished, we are walking with Christ. As he walks along the way of the cross, we too are walking along that painful road. And most important, he is walking with us.

We wish for a king that will take away our suffering and pain, our doubts and our brokenness...and we have gotten what we wished for. We are getting that king. But this king's own journey of pain and death before resurrection reminds us that while we get what we wished for, it may not yield exactly the result we anticipate. This king did not avoid earthly pain and suffering, he took it on and went through it. That pain, that suffering, was part of a plan of redemption for our sins. He would not rise in glory, perfectly healed of his suffering, until he suffered. He would not be seated on his king's throne until another time beyond time and another place beyond our own vision. So, too, will we. This is Jesus' promise to those who take up the cross and follow him. We have gotten what we wished for. We have our Messiah. He will be with us always, and we will be with him, in a place that is beyond our imaginings, in due time. In the meantime, take up that cross. Follow him. That is the way to the end of the struggle, to the end of sufferings, by going through those sufferings to the place he promises.

So wish for it. You will get what you wish for, and then some. Take up your cross. It takes you to the fulfillment of the promise, at the side of the one who never left your side.

Amen.