

The Anointed Rescuer

Mark 8:27-38

11th March 2012

Introduction

What motivates you? In our world today we're constantly bombarded with messages aimed at motivating us to do things, to change things, to be a different person. Advertisers throw motivating questions at us like...

1. Do you want to Look and Feel Good?
2. Do you want to be Healthy and Fit?
3. Do you want to bring your Dreams into Reality?

These questions attempt to motivate us...try this great skin care product, go to this new gym, discover our miracle diet and so on and so forth. Interestingly Jesus was never into weight loss, fitness regimes, beauty cosmetics or indeed many of the other things advertisers claim will 'change our lives for the better'! And he never had his own website to motivate people to "look and feel good". But – Jesus did use some pretty good questions to expose truths people need to grasp and to motivate people to change. He spoke and taught to bring sinners to God, to make unbelievers into disciples. And there are also truths Jesus' followers (then and now) needed to grasp more fully once they'd become disciples; truths they need to live out more completely and obediently. Jesus isn't just interested in having disciples. He is committed to raising up mature disciples who grow and develop. He often highlighted this through questions: probing questions which got (and still get) under the skin, which excited, challenged and exposed those who heard him (then and now). His questions motivate us to change, to develop, to be transformed more and more into his image and likeness.

In our reading today Jesus asks his disciples a question saying: "Who do you same I am"? But before looking at this question, it's worth noting how Mark's gospel as a whole compels us to answer three broader questions which are essential to consider first.

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did he come?
3. What does it mean to follow him?

1. Who is Jesus?

That first question, "Who is Jesus?" is really the preoccupation of the first half of Mark's gospel. Incident after incident in Jesus' life forces those around him (and us!) to ask, "Who is he...who is Jesus?" He teaches with authority, forgives sins, heals the sick, casts out demons, raises the dead...Who is he? It's not until we get to this passage...fully halfway through Mark's gospel... that anyone seems to have been able to adequately answer that question. The crowds didn't know who he was; the Pharisees didn't know; the scribes and priests didn't know; even Jesus' closest friends—the disciples—didn't know who he was. But then comes an amazing breakthrough. Under direct questioning from Jesus, Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Christ".

What does it mean that Jesus is "the Christ"? ("Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah", which means "Anointed One". This term was used in Old Testament times to speak of kings, priests and prophets which were chosen and empowered by God for a particular task. The Jews came to expect an ultimate Messiah who would deliver them and establish his righteous kingdom.) So in other words Peter now recognised Jesus as this - "long-awaited King, God's ruler, foretold by the prophets." We finally have the answer to the first question. Or at least part of the answer; because a true and full understanding of who

Jesus is, is then tied up in the answer to the question, "Why did Jesus come?" And it's only now in Mark's gospel that Jesus starts to address that question.

2. Why did he come?

From v. 31 onwards Jesus begins teaching them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and after three days rise again. Suddenly Jesus reveals that not only was he the Christ, the King, the Anointed one - he was also the "suffering servant".

700 years earlier, the OT prophet Isaiah foretold of a man, a servant-figure, who'd come and be rejected by the people, die a sacrificial death and bear the sins of the people. He would be a "suffering servant". Here in this passage Jesus identifies himself with that suffering servant figure. He knows his heading towards his own death...towards tortuous crucifixion. Peter, therefore, was only half-right about Jesus' identity.

So – why did Jesus come? He came to be the King, but a king who would suffer and die as God's "anointed rescuer"; and only afterwards rise victoriously from the dead. So what does it mean to follow him?

Well following a king usually involves obedience, giving honour, respect; revering, even venerating. I read on the internet that a particularly rich king - The Sultan of Brunei paid his badminton instructor £1.26 million a year. You can be pretty sure there was plenty of venerating going on right there!

Well Jesus was a very different King...for a start he managed okay without the bank balance!...Yes - he deserves obedience and honour. But Jesus was also the suffering servant...how do you follow a suffering servant? Jesus knew (then and now) that this is a real and pressing issue which is why he goes on to address it. He knew he was going to Jerusalem where he'd face the cross, it's that language of crucifixion which Jesus now uses, to describe what his followers must do.

3. What does it mean to follow him?

Look at Verses 34-37: Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Deny yourself...and take up your cross. That's what following the suffering servant, 'the anointed rescuer' involves. So let's explore this a bit. First, notice who Jesus is talking to here....

Then he called the "**crowd**" to him along with his disciples...Today we represent the crowd and the disciples of the 21st century - a mixture of people just like it was then. We're all at different places in our journey of faith – you may be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ, you may not be or you may not be sure where you stand. But, I think we'd all agree it is probably easier to follow a king who looks and acts like a king. But it's a tough call to follow Jesus and feel any sense of being rescued when we hear "you've got to deny yourself and take up your cross". It doesn't sound terribly motivational.

So what did Jesus mean by saying "you've got to deny yourself...and take up your cross"? We are in Lent at the moment and I guess the most common thing most of us give up during this time is chocolate – nothing wrong with that. But is there a bit more to it? To truly denying yourself - what does it look like? Jesus says to us as his disciples, "me, you, us - must deny ourselves." In other words to follow Jesus we must forever say 'no' to ourselves and 'yes' to Christ. We must say 'no' to our own natural love of ease and comfort. We must say 'no' to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will. We must say 'no' to the instincts and the desires which prompt us to touch and taste and handle the things we shouldn't. We must unhesitatingly say 'yes' to the voice and the command of Jesus. We must be able to say with Paul - it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. We live no longer to follow our own will, but instead follow the will of Christ. If I am to be a follower of Jesus then that

means I must crucify my in-built desire to run my life my way, and instead do what pleases him. And not just once, but day after day.

This is a really tough call and I confess I really struggle and usually fall short – I guess we all do. So why should we take up our cross? Jesus' response is found in verse 35 & 36 where he poses a compelling motivational question. For...whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. And then verse 36: What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? We have a deeply embedded desire to be "blessed", to be safe, from the things that cause trouble and pain. That's the way we're wired. And it's not a bad thing, it's the way God made us! God has also set eternity in our hearts (Eccl 3:11). But sadly in our fallen nature we seek these things in the wrong way.

Many people...billions of people...attempt to find happiness and security by walking down a well-worn path of indulging themselves with self-centredness and materialism – and I hold my own hands up to that. But it's a hopeless, soulless way that simply aims too low. One of the effects of sin is that it's distorted the desire within us to be satisfied with what is truly great. And so we settle for the trivial, ordinary and temporary things.

C. S. Lewis once wrote: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

According to Jesus, you can gain the whole world and still aim too low. The Sultan of Brunei has a personal fortune running into billions of pounds, he has about 5,000 cars and personally owns a £115 million Boeing 747, filled with gold-plated furniture. That man has denied himself nothing! But let me say, he's aimed too low. Even if he owned the whole world...he would still be like an ignorant child making mud pies in a slum. Because there is only one way he and indeed anyone can save his or her soul. How?

By allowing the anointed rescuer 'Jesus Christ' to rescue you. He comes to rescue us - all we have to do is open our heart to him. And then the more we give our heart to him the more we grow in his likeness, we become more and more enriched, fulfilled and transformed. What does that mean in practice - crucifying those desires to self indulge the world's crazy way; and instead putting your hand into the hand of the one person in the universe who, by his own death and resurrection, can guide you to eternity, and equip you to follow him along his path. Jesus the anointed rescuer is the only way we can truly be saved.

But it's not easy stopping doing things our way and putting Jesus' agenda at the top of our life's list of priorities. Sometimes it will cost us dearly - it may even hurt. Don't get me wrong - Jesus is not against pleasure or saying we should seek pain needlessly. What he is talking about is the heroic effort needed to follow him moment by moment, to do his will even when the work is difficult and the future looks bleak.

Conclusion

God gave us life to spend and not to keep. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort, security, if our sole aim is to make life as long and as trouble-free as possible, if we will make no effort except for ourselves, we are losing life all the time. But if we spend life for others, if we forget time, wealth and comfort in our desire to do something for Jesus and for the people for whom Jesus died, we are winning life all the time.

Imagine if everyone just wanted to remain comfortably at home. Imagine if there was no such person as an explorer or a pioneer? What would happen if every mother refused to take the risk of bearing a child? What would happen if we all spent all we had upon ourselves? The very essence of life is in risking life and spending life, not in saving it and hoarding it. So - imagine what it would be like if we all really did pick up our cross and follow Jesus every day. If we really did put Christ top of our list of priorities every day, if every day we consistently put others before ourselves. Imagine the impact on this community, on those we work with, on those we love and imagine the impact on our own lives.

Jesus wants us to **choose** to follow him rather than to live a life of sin and self satisfaction. He wants us to stop trying to control our own destiny and to let him direct us. He asks for submission, not self hatred; he asks us only to lose our self centred determination to be in charge. Because those things (whatever they are) that we seek to try and make us happy aren't our salvation. Our salvation is in Jesus. It's through him that I'm saved, you're saved, we're saved. Let's remind ourselves - by his grace we have invested wisely. Jesus said, if you leave what the world cherishes and follow me, you will receive a hundred fold in this life, and in the age to come eternal life. A hundred fold. That's a 10,000% return on investment. The Nationwide Bank gives me about 2.5%!

So, here's the motivating question: do you want to forfeit your soul for eternity? Surely the answer is "no". Or let me put it positively. Do you want eternal blessing? Then follow Jesus. "I have come to give life, and life to the full" said Jesus. Don't settle for a life that looks impressive, but is ultimately empty and futureless. Let Jesus' words motivate us to grow in our desire to follow him.

Hear C.S.Lewis again: "Give yourself up, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day...submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life... Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look to Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in!"

Now, depending on who you are this morning, one application of this sermon might be that today you start following Jesus. Perhaps today is the day to take up your cross and follow him. But another application if you're already a disciple of Jesus is you begin seeking to deny yourself because you desire His will with all your heart recognising in this you will find perfect freedom! This is not the means of salvation but the result. The anointed one has already rescued us.

What's motivating about this - well – following Jesus obediently and serving him sacrificially is actually the most amazing, God-honouring, self-fulfilling thing we can do. So let us respond to the word of God. Let us hear this question (who do you say I am) and be motivated to following Jesus as the priority in our lives. Because the anointed rescuer has come to save us and give us life and life to the full and to live eternally with him.