

B Lent 02
8 March 2009
RCL Mark 8.31-38

Quite Openly

One of the things I admire most about Jesus is His courage. I think it is easy to miss this if our image of Him is the sissy Victorian pictures of a long-haired, effete androgyne, eyes cast heavenward. Jesus was anything but.

This was a scrappy little Jew who confronted the power structure of His day and called them on their hypocrisy. That is what got Him killed.

Jesus was no fool. Our gospel reading today (Mark 8.31-38) shows Him quite aware of what awaits Him: “Jesus began to teach his disciples 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.”

I wonder what the process of His growth in understanding was. Responding to the mysterious moving of God’s Spirit, the Nazareth carpenter travels to His wild cousin baptizing people in the River Jordan. Moved by His own response to the Divine Spirit, Jesus begins proclaiming a message virtually identical to John’s: repent for the kingdom of heaven is close.

But as time goes on we see a development that more and more removes Jesus from the standard religious understanding of the Judaism of His day. Jesus began to see beyond the Law, which provided such emotional security for the Jewish people. The Law told them that they were special to God and provided guidance in how to belong to God, how to please God. But Jesus saw beyond the minutiae of the Law to the spirit behind it. It was the *spirit* of holiness that Jesus taught, not the mechanism. That took courage, courage not only to oppose the religious power structure of His day, but also courage to explore a religious landscape that had lost its familiar forms and signposts. If one doesn’t please God simply by avoiding pork and pagans, what *does* it take to please God? This is where the courage of Jesus led Him. Not many of us have the willingness to question our assumptions in that fundamental fashion.

Jesus’ courage takes on another dimension as He develops His thought and comes more and more into conflict with the religious leaders of his own faith. This was

more dangerous than being on the outs with your rector. The religious dimension included every facet of life, even of what we would call secular today. The religious leaders had authority to shun, to banish, to remove the means of making a living, and, as we see eventually with Jesus, even authority to execute. Opposing them was no small matter.

Yet today's reading from Mark's story of Jesus shows Him aware of the danger of His death well before that last, deadly trip to Jerusalem. But He continues the course He has set for Himself, the radical obedience to God that most of us fail at. I would have been long on the road to somewhere safe, but such escape was not for Jesus.

And speaking of roads, look at the one Jesus didn't take out of the Garden of Gethsemane. Here's His last chance to avoid what is clearly coming to Him, the humiliation, abandonment, and physical agony of crucifixion. His emotional, spiritual, and physical torment is so great that He breaks out in a sweat so extreme it was as if He were bleeding. And yet, after a period of wrestling with Himself (and perhaps with Satan), He says to God, "Let your will be done." The silence thundering from heaven signifies that His humble obedience has been accepted. The way of the cross is now open and unavoidable. Jesus walks that way rather than skipping town.

What magnificent courage!

So, what does that mean to you and me? I hope that we see in ourselves the mirror of Jesus' courage. We are not facing physical crucifixion as He did, but we nonetheless face other demanding life situations. Some people run from them, and the consequences are often crushing. We know people who have refused to grow up, to mature from children into the responsibilities of adulthood. They hide in drink, drugs, self-delusion, money, power, self-righteousness – the list of our avoidances is long and demeaning.

But there are those who meet these challenges with more or less success. I admire all sorts of people I meet in daily life, for each one is a story of a successful human life, successful because God loves that person and will have her with Him forever. I admire parents who have the courage to entrust themselves and their beloved children to an unknown future and a demanding present. I admire married folks who have the courage to be loyal to one whom they have chosen to love. I admire single folks who find a way to validation and self-respect in our culture that does not value the unmarried state, even that is often openly suspicious of single

people. I admire teachers who day by day give themselves to their (usually) clueless students. I admire the ageing who are constantly entering unknown territory as their bodies, minds, and spirits grow to maturity and beyond. I admire the young who throw themselves with such enthusiasm into the ways of the world and of the spirit. I admire those who push the envelope intellectually, artistically, socially, just as much as I admire those who commit to the creativity of living life in all its ordinariness. In each of these I see someone to be admired in themselves, and at the same time I see the face of Jesus looking out from their lives into the world. We humans, and perhaps all of creation, are graced with meaning and purpose beyond the narrow, golden limits of ourselves.

None of us is perfect. We all fall short. Yet the story of our lives is often glorious, illustrious, jaw-dropping. I think God looked with admiration on Jesus, and I think God looks with admiration on Jesus' sisters and brothers, you and me. Very often I am aware of the glory in someone's life at his funeral. Even the short biographies in eulogies are moving testaments to human courage, to life challenges met, to defeats overcome, to victories shared.

Be ye sure that you are one of these. Our lives are not perfect, by any means. Yet they have infinite value, each one of them. God in His Christ has given everything He has to each of us. Ours is to accept the gift divine, and to give ourselves in return. At the heart of the matter, that is what life is all about. That takes real courage. I say that to you quite openly.