

Proper 19B “And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things.” Mark 8.31

The famous 19th century biologist and agnostic, Thomas Huxley, was once lovingly confronted by a very sincere Christian. This believer stressed to Huxley that he was not in any way criticizing Huxley's sincerity. Nevertheless, might it not be possible that mentally the great scientist was color blind? That is, some people cannot see traces of green where other people cannot help but see it. Could it be that this was Huxley's problem--that he was simply blind to truth that was quite evident to others? Huxley, being a man of integrity, admitted that this was possible, and added that if it were, he himself, of course, could not know or recognize it.

This is the difficulty with coming to find out what the truth is. The question is not whether there is something that we might call the truth. Instead, the more fundamental question is, do we have the ability, the mental and physical capacity to recognize the truth when we come upon it? For this reason, blindness, a failure of the eyes, has often been associated with our inability to understand. It is the blindness of the mind. The sun may rise in all its fullness, but the

incapacitated eye remains dark. The truth may be revealed in all clarity, but the darkened mind will not receive it. The sun is no less bright, and the truth is no less true, but they are inconceivable to the blind of eye and understanding.

At the midway point in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus assessed his disciples' understanding and found them to be failing. The time was short. Jesus knew that soon he would march into Jerusalem and join battle with the forces of darkness. Before this could occur he wanted to make sure that his disciples had learned their lessons; that they understood who he was and what he was about. But to his disappointment, they were still quibbling over who forgot to bring the picnic basket. "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Having eyes do you not see?" He had healed the sick, raised the dead, stilled the storm with a word and fed the hungry by the thousands. How long would they be blind? So Jesus proceeded to heal a blind man. But even this man's vision was blurred: he saw men walking who looked like trees. He could see, but couldn't make any sense out of what he was seeing.

After this, Jesus took his disciples on a long walk from Bethsaida on the east bank of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi at the northernmost tip of Israel on the slopes of Mount Hermon. This was a town that had long been the center of pagan worship. More recently it had been devoted to the worship of the Roman Caesar. This was a strange, and out of the way, place for Jesus to bring his disciples. He had taken them there to get their undivided attention and to ask them if they understood what they had seen. Were they blind? Did they understand what they had seen Jesus do? Did they understand the meaning behind these miraculous acts? “Who do men say that I am?” The disciples responded, saying that some thought that he was John the Baptist reincarnated. Some people thought that he was the prophet Elijah who was to usher in the Kingdom of God. Some thought that he was another prophet in the long line of Isaiah and Jeremiah. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” The disciples’ eyes, like the eyes of the blind man, had been opened, if only just a little. They had concluded that Jesus was the Messiah, in Greek, the Christ, that the Israelites had been hoping for.

Even as the disciples struggled to see clearly, we often struggle at this point in the Gospel. Many have thought that what the disciples had concluded and Peter had proclaimed was that Jesus was the divine son of God, the second person of the Trinity. This is confirmed by Matthew's version in which Peter says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." But we shouldn't be so quick to this conclusion. It is most certainly the case that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John believed that Jesus was the divine son of the everlasting Father. It is most certainly true that the rest of the disciples, including Peter, came to this conclusion as well. As the history of the Christian Church progressed the word "Christ" became a title describing that "Jesus" as eternal, divine, and one with the Father. But here, Peter and the rest of the disciples are not addressing that question at all.

Consider the context. Jesus had just warned the disciples to watch out for the influence of the Pharisees and the supporters of King Herod. Each of these was expecting the Messiah, the long awaited king. The Pharisees thought the Messiah would come and defeat the pagan gentile armies, and establish the kingdom of God on behalf of the pious Jews. The followers of Herod hoped that the Messiah would come and establish the throne once and for all for Herod who had

always claimed to be the true king of Israel. The disciples were saying that neither of these parties was right. They thought Jesus was the true king, the Messiah. But more dangerously still, they stood in Caesarea Philippi, the shrine to the most powerful man in the world. Here they were saying that there was another king besides Caesar. They were saying that they thought Jesus was the king who could finally defeat the Romans and restore the kingdom to Jerusalem, as in the days of King David and Solomon.

But how does Jesus respond to their declaration? He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. This was not at all what they expected. The sign that a man was the true Messiah was that he would come, purify the Temple, throw out the gentiles, and establish the glorious rule of Almighty God from David's throne in Jerusalem. The sign that a man was not the true Messiah was that the gentiles defeated him and killed him. What Jesus was saying made no sense. Peter, being a devoted friend, took Jesus aside to explain to him these simple logistics. You can't be Messiah if you are dead, Jesus! But Jesus rebuked him saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the

side of God, but of men.” Did Jesus think that Peter was Satan or possessed by Satan? No. Rather, Jesus was saying to the disciples that the kingdom of God must come through the suffering of the Messiah. This was counterintuitive, even though the great prophets had foretold it. Yet, this was no way to lead a political movement, much less wage a war. General Patton said that the point of war was to make the other guy die for his country. But Jesus said that the road to victory went through the middle of the valley of death. Any other path was not God’s path. Any other path was Satan’s path. Peter had seen that Jesus was Messiah, but he had not seen clearly what that entailed.

Jesus concluded his evaluation of the disciples by calling the crowds to him again. When they had gathered around he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” This is Jesus’ conclusion, and it is ours this morning. For Jesus calls us to see that the duty of the Christian is to follow in the path where Jesus has lead the way. Yes, Jesus must walk it before we can go that way. Yes, Jesus must die on our behalf, otherwise all our walking is in vain. But

we must walk after him otherwise we cannot be counted as his disciples. Truly, these are some of the most difficult verses in all of Holy Scripture. Wasn't Jesus' suffering sufficient? Have we not avoided the humiliation that he endured because he has received it on our behalf? Isn't the Christian life simply about believing a certain number of doctrines, minding one's manners, and turning up for services occasionally?

Sadly, this is the assumption of so many within the Christian faith, but it cannot be farther from the truth. We must deny ourselves. By this Jesus didn't mean that we should give up sinning. It should go without saying that we should be doing battle daily with those things that are against the will of God. We must put away all lust and anger. We must stir up ourselves against sloth and laziness. We must bind our lips and tongues against useless talking and gossip. This is not denying yourself. Denying yourself means not indulging the natural wants and desires of the human life in the knowledge that this world is passing away and that a new heaven and a new earth is on its way. Denying yourself means saying to the world that it does not control you, and that its baubles do not entice you. When asked about tithing and stewardship, the great writer CS Lewis said that, "The Christian

should never try to keep up with the Jones's. His giving should be sacrificial and evident in his standard of living.”

Again, Jesus said that after denying ourselves we should take up our own crosses and follow him. Notwithstanding all the movies that have attempted to make crucifixion horrible to the modern culture, it is safe to say that we do not have much experience that would inform Jesus' demand on his disciples. The cross was not simply an instrument of execution. It was an implement of torture. But more specifically, the Romans employed this machine of death to solidify its control upon the varied peoples that fell under their imperial control. Caesar was Lord. If anyone doubted this fact, they should refer to the groaning victims hanging from the crosses that lined the roads entering the great cities of the day. Yet Jesus told his disciples to embrace their own crosses and follow him. Does this mean that we should actively rebel against the government of our own day? No it doesn't. But do not cast this off as simply an overly vivid metaphor. Instead, we can be sure that following Jesus will inevitably bring us into disfavor with the powers that rule the world. In that day we must be ready to embrace the shame our savior endured.

To be sure, this truth that Jesus speaks is as difficult to comprehend today as it was for the disciples 2000 years ago. We are as blind to the brightness of the Son as the blind man had been. We, like Peter, would prefer a warlike Messiah who would take charge and drive out our enemies with force and violence. We prefer winners, not losers. We prefer preemptive strikes to allowing our opponents to get the best of us. And so we may rightly ask one another, "Who do you say that Jesus is?" Paul was right when he wrote that his message of the crucified Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. But it is through the mystery of suffering and obedience to the will of the Father, that Jesus the Messiah and all who will follow him shall come to the glory of the Father and all his holy angels. AMEN