

Hymns: **652** “Lord, we come to ask your healing”
 355 “Jesu, lover of my soul”
 “O Zion open now thy gates”
 323 “I will sing the wondrous story”

Readings: **Romans 8:31-38**
 Mark 8:31-38

“HE SAID ALL THIS QUITE OPENLY”

Last week we saw the wilderness in which Jesus began his ministry.

Today we catch a glimpse of, we half-see, the wilderness where he’ll end it. It seems astonishing that in such a short space of time, Jesus should have so upset his contemporaries – those in power and also the populace – that he would be driven into a different kind of desert, one in which he would suffer and be rejected and be killed.

So what on earth has happened? I’ve trawled the chapters of St Mark’s gospel between the record of that first wilderness experience and the promise contained in this morning’s scripture passage of a future similar time of testing. I wanted to see what the “charge sheet” would say. He was going to be treated like a felon, a common criminal, a despised and much-mocked member of the human race. He must have done so many wrong things. That’s what you’d suppose. But this is what I found:

He’d

- healed a troubled man in the synagogue;
- brought comfort to untold numbers of suffering people;
- touched and healed a leper;
- given new life to a paralytic;
- brought relief to a man with a withered hand;
- driven out evil spirits;
- calmed a storm;
- restored a severely demented man to his right mind;
- brought new life to a little girl thought to be dead;
- fed a large and hungry crowd;
- dealt with the physical needs of large numbers of people;

- taken his message out into the Gentile world;
- healed a deaf man;
- healed a blind mind.

What a series of misdemeanours is this! How on earth did a man who accomplished so much for the good of those around him declare that it would all turn sour and that he'd soon be "in the dock". He had done all his good deeds so modestly. He made it clear again and again that he sought no popular acclaim. He slipped away regularly to keep his own company and to engage in prayer. He understood that the law was important but was clear that it was intended to serve people's needs rather than imprison them with its demands. If the law came into conflict with the primordial needs of the people who came to him, he always prioritised those needs. The plight of suffering people "moved him with compassion."

Well, he would be clearly considered a subversive. Obviously he would have to be silenced – if not in argument then in a sinister and more final way.

Jesus was very sensitive to the antagonism he was stirring up and he faced (with stark realism) the prospect of:

- great suffering at the hands of his enemies
- utter rejection by the establishment of his day;
- assassination.

And he speaks openly about this to his followers.

I wonder why we are so often shy of the facts facing us? Why do we so often find or invent denial mechanisms? Why do we prefer not to speak (or think) openly about things?

We've had so many deaths at the Chapel in recent weeks. Over the course of my ministry, I've been with hundreds of people walking in the valley of the shadow of death. I've extracted from that range of experience these two scenarios. My question would be: which of them would you prefer?

- a) The man who's clearly not got much longer to go but whose will-to-live refuses to let him settle for the inevitable. I want to console him, pray for the peace of his soul, help him to look death in the eye and embrace it. But I can't. So I end up sharing the lie that's been brought to life around the man's hospital bed. I find myself colluding with their denial, urging the man to be strong, telling him I

expect to see some improvement the next time I come. He knows and I know, and he knows that I know, that things are different. And yet I'm now complicit in the Big Lie.

- b) The woman who greets me warmly from her hospital bed. Her tearful husband is present. She asks me to look after him. "Now that you're here," she says to me, "I can tell you that the doctors have said there's nothing more they can do for me." At this point her husband collapses in grief protesting that she shouldn't say such things. Then she starts to speak again, "I now need to prepare myself for all that lies ahead of me. Pray for me". And then [pointing to her husband] Look after him".

The denial syndrome kicks in **after** death too. This, of course, is a recognised feature of grief and has been identified by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her magisterial book "Death and Dying" which appeared in 1970.

We don't want to believe that our loved one has gone. We delude ourselves with fairy tales. We recreate in our minds and our tributes and our eulogies a person who never existed. It all reminds me of a remark of the late cardinal Basil Hume.

He and I were sitting next to each other at the funeral of a Great Methodist. The tributes were lengthy and multiple. It got tiresome as we heard one superlative following quickly upon another. It led Basil Hume to nudge me and whispered in my ear: "here's another reason why Methodists and Catholics have so much in common." Pointing to the coffin he said, "the dead man's lying down there and" (pointing to the preacher in the pulpit) "the preacher's lying up there."

Why on earth can't we bury the person we knew rather than those figments of our imagination, those imaginary people whose sins and oddities have all been air-brushed out of the picture? It's all another instance of denial.

Speaking openly is something we too often seem afraid of. Peter, Jesus's closest disciple, seems to have suffered from this ailment. He rebuked Jesus for his words. It's as if he were saying, "you've pleased the crowds, you've healed the sick, you offered a message of hope, you're on a roll." For Peter everything had had an upward thrust, a promising feel. So he couldn't bear to hear Jesus talking about suffering and rejection and death. Jesus was the person everyone had been waiting for. How dare he let everyone down by speaking in this manner?

Poor Peter. He didn't really get it.

You can build your life on dreams, illusions, deceit; you can divert your attention from reality through the use of drugs, or sex, or a lavish lifestyle, or cruelty (imposing your will on another); even religion. You can shut your eyes to the real world, your ears to the truth. But when you've done all these things, nothing will be changed. The end is nigh for all of us and that can never be the slogan an eccentric evangelical. And it's better to be open about the facts. For one thing, being honest about life, suffering and death helps us to seize the moment, to embrace the NOW, to recognise and be glad about our blessings.

It was Blaise Pascal, 17th century French philosopher and scientist, who painted a picture that speaks to me when I think of these things. After a glamorous ball at the palace of Versailles, with its huge mirrors and thousands of candles and imposing ceremonial, with everybody dressed in their finest livery and ballroom gowns, something interesting happened when the King left their company and the hundreds of guests had to find their way to their bedrooms. Holding tiny candles they'd make their way down long dark corridors until they got to their room. Inside, they took off all their those glittering and glamorous garments, throwing them over the back of a chair or just simply on the floor. And there they were, hundreds of the Great and the Good for French society spread across the palace estate, almost naked as they puffed out the candle and were swallowed up in darkness as they got into their beds. When all that differentiates us has been stripped away, we're each of us frail and vulnerable, puny in the face of all that will one day engulf us and sweep us away.

"What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world at the cost of his real self?" A haunting question. That "real self" is much more important than the way we dress it or hide it or cover it with the fig leaves of wishful thinking. "What can he give to buy that self back again?" Oh my word, that's a raking question.

It's a question that should be addressed to "Jihaddi John," those three girls on the run in Syria, the top man at Lloyds bank whose just walked away with an obscene 11.5 million pound package, and all who build castles-in-the-sky.

The misunderstood Jesus faced the impending calamity with equanimity. He spoke of it openly. He knew that the values he'd taught, the compassion he'd shown, the courage he'd always displayed would only amount to anything if they remained undiminished, untarnished, attractive and compelling in the desert that he was soon to face. The place of testing would be the cross on which he would die. And that's what he's pointing to now in this exchange with his disciples.

Jesus came out of the first wilderness strengthened for his ministry.

He would need to come out of the second wilderness with his legacy strengthened.

The cross, far from being a sign of defeat, is the ultimate guarantee of the success of his enterprise.

He began his ministry by preaching the kingdom of God.

He signed off with a cross, a kiss, the kiss of love. Amen.