

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

12.09.2021
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

The dramatic scenes in this week's gospel reading can be understood to hold two distinct lines of conflict: how does a person understand their own path? And how does a person respond to their friends' responses to their path?

While the particularity of this is powerful in the gospels, it does open up a window for all of us: who do you understand yourself to be? And how do others around you understand that? What conflicts happen for you when you feel misperceived, or when you face pressure from others to act in a way you would rather not? What do your friends see in you? How do you respond to what they see?

Perhaps as a way of reflecting on your own story before reading the gospel story this week, you may wish to recall times with close friends or family where there's been conflict about identity, behaviour, and direction. Consider where you experienced that conflict in your body, how you sought wisdom, how you made your decisions of response.

Text

Mark 8:27–38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my

followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Comment

Mark's gospel does not have a narrated temptation scene in the desert; the first chapter of Mark merely recalls that “and immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him” (Hello King James). However, despite the lack of narrative information, it can be seen that Mark is profoundly aware that Jesus is present to the presence of temptation throughout his public life. Even here, in a safe cocoon of conversation with his followers, when one of them says something that would appear to him to be a deviation from what he's called to, he names it as temptation — he even names his friend as Satan.

Contained here is a profound theology of Satan. So many of us — me included — were haunted by images of hornéd beasts with spiky tails and goat-hooves. The gospel indicates that Satan is a *function* not a *character*. It is the temptation Jesus notices, coming even from a friend.

Conflict is everywhere in this text. Jesus is clearly in conflict with himself, hence his quick reaction to what Peter suggests. If Peter's suggestion had been laughable, I imagine Jesus would have laughed. However, it is a temptation, and one is only tempted by what tempts us. Jesus too, must have wished to see another way before him than the political turmoil he foresaw as a natural consequence of his mission as he took it to Jerusalem.

As you may recall from the last two entries, Mark's gospel has five sections:

1/ the opening in the desert (1:1–1:13)

2/ the ministry in Galilee (1:14–8:21)

3/ the journey to Jerusalem (8:22–10:52)

4/ the events in Jerusalem (11:1–15:47)

5/ the tomb (16:1–8; 9–20)

(my apologies, I mistyped the references for section 2 & 3 last week, these are correct, and I've corrected them on the online edition of last week's entry)

This week's reading is right at the beginning of the third section in this breakdown

schema of Mark's gospel: the journey to Jerusalem. Jesus' mood is sombre. He begins challenging his disciples as to whether they *really* understand what they are doing, what they are going to face, what they are following, and who they believe him to be. Ultimately, Mark is not overly interested in the disciples, because despite a promising early start, they become relatively subsidiary as respondents to Jesus. Instead, it is marginalised people whose responses to Jesus are praised.

So Jesus' question about "who do you understand me to be?" is a theme that repeats itself throughout this section. Understanding Jesus' identity corresponds with an understanding of Jesus' mission; and understanding Jesus' mission is — in the pragmatic political mind of Jesus — tantamount to understanding the opposition he'll face. *Are you ready for this?* seems to be the understanding of Jesus. He himself is somewhat reconciled to what he's going to face, even though it seems to bring him to the edge. He is wondering whether his followers are as pragmatic as he. The strength of his words "Those who are ashamed of me and my words..." also displays the tension he finds himself in.

So many of us — when facing situations of conflict, when facing situations where we know integrity calls us to speak up — might find ourselves in tension. Perhaps you find yourself sleepless, or exhausted, or tense with your closest friends, or unable to relax, or sentimental, or distant...

Of course, while there are ways in which this experience of Jesus resembles everyday experiences many of us have as we navigate our own integrity and challenges, the gospels are asserting something unique about Jesus: namely that he is the Messiah. This, too, introduces a conflict: for him, for those who follow him, and for those who don't. Mark's gospel is not shy about making this conflict clear: do you follow him? it is asking its readers, over and over. Do you?

Response

The question in this text is one of who — or what — we follow. And that is a worthwhile thing to consider. I was somewhat traumatised years ago by public christian meetings where those who "followed" Jesus were asked to stand up, or raise their hand, etc., immediately implying that the rest of us were the goats.

However, what I think is a deeper point is asking everyone — whatever their religious or moral practice — what it is they follow. Not for the sake of having a "good group/bad group" delineation, but as an opening.

For those who follow Christianity it's not so straightforward either: there are all kinds of versions of Jesus put forward in public life. Which of the Jesuses do you follow? How do you decide?

These additional layers to previously binary questions might be useful for you as you consider what your relationship to *follow* is.

Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth,
you asked much of yourself
and much of your friends.

And today you ask us what we follow.
As we answer, may we tell the truth.
May we face our fear,
and dismantle its power.
Because you, surely, were afraid
and still acted.
Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills