

## **Year B**

### **Mark 8:27-38**

Annie and I managed to get down to Edinburgh for a couple of nights last month and when we were there we went to the Scottish National Gallery where there is an exhibition of some of Rembrandt's paintings on display at the moment. It's very impressive; even for someone like me who doesn't know an awful lot about the visual arts.

It was explained in the presentation to the exhibition that Rembrandt specialised in the

selfie! Throughout his life he painted himself and so it's fascinating, in an era long before the photographic camera, to view a changing face through the years as age began to take its toll. One of the paintings on display is *The Three Crosses* and this contains one of Rembrandt's most telling selfies. If you were to look at Rembrandt's painting of *The Three Crosses*, your attention would be drawn first to the centre cross on which Jesus died. Then as you would look at the crowd gathered around the foot of that cross, you'd be impressed by the various facial expressions and actions of the people

involved in the awful crime of crucifying Jesus. Finally, your eyes would drift to the edge of the painting and catch sight of another figure, almost hidden in the shadows. Art critics believe this is a representation of Rembrandt himself, for he recognised his responsibility, as a human being, for Jesus ending up on the cross.

The Gospel reading today should be a profoundly shocking one but it has largely lost its force to shock through a kind of indoctrination. And that's shocking in itself. Peter was asked a question by Jesus and he got the answer right, only for Jesus to point

out to him that Peter hadn't understood the answer he had just given him.

The events took place in the villages of Caesaria Philippi. That's the physical context which actually informs the political context whether Peter was aware of that or not. Caesaria Philippi was the northern stronghold of Roman power and control in Palestine. When Peter answered Jesus' question with - you are the Messiah - he was effectively stating that Jesus was to be the liberator, the one who would proceed to take the Roman occupiers on and get rid of them from the land. Messiah was a political

concept. The Messiah, the anointed one of God, would reign as God's representative at Zion and the foreign oppressor would be no more. For Peter, Messiah was all about triumph and success.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian wrote; "The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard."

Peter would begin to learn that particular truth through the harsh words that Jesus directed towards him. The right answer to the question is not sufficient without an understanding of its meaning and that

strikes right to the heart of the issue in this passage and has implications for us today. Peter could not understand why his Messiah should in any sense have to suffer anything. Yes, it may be the case that in the fight with the Romans he may take an occasional blow but that may be avoided! After all, what's the sense in suffering for suffering's sake? And what's more, no more of this talk of Jesus' followers having to suffer too. If news like that gets out no-one will want to follow this Messiah anywhere. No, let's be sensible - let's be reasonable.

Poor Peter - we may nod to ourselves knowingly. After all, we may be aware through years of teaching, why Jesus had to suffer. It's obvious, isn't it? God's judgement and God's mercy need to be satisfied *and* exercised and in the giving of the perfect Christ the debt of humankind is paid and the mercy of God in the provision of such a solution is demonstrated. The Cross in this sense is a necessity and lots of theological detail has filled in the frame of this kind of argument over the years to the extent that we receive it, often without questioning it. But note how quiet the text is

regarding the reasons. It simply states that he *must* undergo great suffering - he must. But what does that mean? Our doctrine can be indoctrinating if it prevents us from asking questions. We must always feel free to question - to probe and to analyse and to seek to discern the truth. For so long the church has settled on a divine punishment / divine mercy meeting place in Christ and we accept that without questioning, and with the acceptance, I would suggest to you, the scandal of Peter's confession is lost. You see, the point Jesus was making to Peter through this critical moment was that humanity did



not need a political saviour. Humanity needs a God who must endure the depth of human pain in order that humanity may be reconciled to God. There is no hint here of an external negotiation between judgement and mercy but of an intrinsic necessity; the outworking of God's decision to enter into and to reclaim the whole of human existence. Dwight Morrow, the father of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, once held a dinner party to which Calvin Coolidge had been invited. After Coolidge left, Morrow told the remaining guests that Coolidge would make a good president. The others disagreed. They felt

Coolidge was too quiet, that he lacked colour and personality. No one would like him, they said. Anne, then age six, spoke up: "I like him," she said. Then she displayed a finger with a small bandage around it. "He was the only one at the party who asked about my sore finger." "That's why he would make a good president," added Morrow.<sup>1</sup>

The cult of personality was of no interest whatsoever to Jesus. It was his compassion and feeling for his people, for the world, that marked him out as Messiah and that was the scandal to a people looking for a mighty

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<sup>1</sup> Bits & Pieces, February 4, 1993, pp. 18-19.

deliverer. May we be saved from the indoctrination of providing the right answer without an awareness of the profound challenge of 'God with us'. For that is the true scandal of the Messiah.

C.S. Lewis wrote; "Lying at your feet is your dog. Imagine, for the moment, that your dog and every dog is in deep distress. Some of us love dogs very much. If it would help all the dogs in the world to become like men, would you be willing to become a dog? Would you put down your human nature, leave your loved ones, your job, hobbies, your art and literature and music, and choose instead of

the intimate communion with your beloved, the poor substitute of looking into the beloved's face and wagging your tail, unable to smile or speak? Christ by becoming man limited the thing which to Him was the most precious thing in the world; his unhampered, unhindered communion with the Father.”

It is from there that our humanity is reclaimed for God. And that must be our way too. It is in our self-limiting that we find the way of God before us. All of this is, of course, a great scandal, but it is the only way in which we can live faithfully as

followers. May God enable us to do so  
faithfully.