

Galilee or Jerusalem?

Mark 8:31-38

March 8, 2009

Galilee or Jerusalem? That's really what was at stake in this emotionally charged exchange between Jesus and Peter. Before we consider what was on the line we need to understand the tension and what contributed to the tension coming to a head at this point. While Peter and Jesus appeared to be reading different scripts about what the future held in this scene, the scene just before this one creates in us the sense that they were on the same page.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. We can be pretty sure the spirits of the disciples were high as they walked that dusty road toward the villages. In the days leading up to this leg of the trip they'd fed over 5,000 with just two fish and five loaves of barley bread – they'd witnessed Jesus walk out on the water to their wave-tossed boat – they were with Jesus when he healed a demon-possessed Gentile girl and a deaf mute and a blind man – they'd helped him feed another 4,000 plus with only seven loaves of bread and some small fish. They had to have sensed that they were on the road to success. Comments between them probably were something like: "Wow! If Jesus keeps this up and plays his cards right, we'll be in and the scribes and priests will be out!" "We could soon be running the temple - calling the shots." And remember, Peter was with them the whole time.

So, when Jesus put that question to them - the "who do people say that I am?" question - they probably fell all over one another sharing what they'd been hearing: "John the Baptist!" "John the Baptist, Jesus!" "Elijah!" "Elijah!" "One of the prophets!" "Elijah!" "One of the prophets!" Need I remind you these were pretty significant names in the history of Judaism? Being identified with the high-rollers of religious history was very significant.

It's interesting to note that the author of the Gospel According to Mark Jesus didn't report Jesus saying neither something to discourage nor to affirm the answers offered. What Jesus did do was ask them what they were thinking. "How about you guys? Who do you think that I am?"

No one was really surprised when the outspoken, extroverted, uninhibited, fearless, extemporaneous Peter proclaimed: "You're the Christ, the Messiah!" "You're the man, Jesus! You're the man!"

I don't know if we can fully understand the courage, the guts, it took Peter to say what he said. If he was right, if Jesus was the hoped for Messiah, things were going to get interesting real fast. Peter's statement meant that he believed the seaside and mountainside chats and the nonchalant walks through the countryside and the friendly visits in little communities were going to change to strategy sessions and combat training and motivational rallies. When he proclaimed his belief, he knew it meant that those in power would step up their rhetoric, take steps to censor Jesus and flex their military might so as to produce fear in those thinking of joining Jesus.

If it wasn't true, well, then Peter would have been in a heap of trouble. He could have been put to death because of the blasphemousness of his proclamation. The truly remarkable thing is that Peter said it despite the risk involved in his saying it. The way Matthew tells the story, Jesus blessed Peter after his proclamation and said that he would give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Both Matthew and Mark add that Jesus responded to Peter's pronouncement with a warning to all those in ear-shot, "Now, don't go spreading this around."

Bible scholars suggest that one of the reasons Jesus instituted the gag order was that he feared and probably even knew that those around him didn't really understand what his being regarded as the "messiah" really meant. That is, they had a very different take on the role of the messiah than he did. While there's a whole lot that could be said about this difference, what it boils down to is most people thought the messiah was going to lead a political and military overthrow of the Roman government. His coming was going to involve violence, a change of power, a blood bath.

So, with those images probably in the minds of all those who heard Peter's confession Jesus started to speak of suffering, rejection, and death. What he said disturbed Peter, blew him away – perhaps others as well – but Peter acted upon his thoughts. I imagine him rushing to Jesus' side and placing one of those big arms of his around Jesus' shoulders and his turning him away from the rest so as to guard the fact that he was going to challenge Jesus: "Whoa, Jesus! What are you saying? Are you out of your mind? What are you thinking? You're the Messiah, so talk like it. It's time to rally the troops, Jesus. People aren't going to follow you if you keep talking like this."

One bible scholar put it this way: "Suffering, rejection, and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion *are* the agenda. It's David's throne *we're* after, ruling the nations with power and might. We signed on for a crown, not a cross!"¹

One preacher offered in his sermon: "Wait a minute, (Jesus). I thought we were going back to Galilee? They love you in Galilee. The crowds are crazy about you in Galilee. Everything is fine in Galilee. Why do you want to go to Jerusalem?"²

And then followed that terrible scene of Jesus turning his back on Peter and his looking into the eyes of the rest of the disciples and knowing that he had to say something – do something – to draw their attention away from Peter and this mistaken idea about what his messiahship was going to be about. Out came his frustration and anger at their lack of understanding after the years of teaching with words and actions. "Get behind me, Satan!" were the words he used to create the distance between Peter (particularly his ideas) and himself (his understanding) and then he gathered himself and started to explain what was going to be different about the next stage of being a follower.

We have to admit these are not words we're used to hearing from Jesus – these are not words we expect from the way we talk about him in the early days of our learning about him – you know, in Sunday School – when we were children.

Some have come to refer to this point in Mark's gospel as the hinge between two different understandings of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Luther talked about them as being two different theologies – the "theology of glory" and the "theology of the cross".³ When Peter made his confession of Jesus as the "messiah" he had in mind the "theology of glory" – the "dramatic healings, perplexing parables, incredible miracles, and shocking inclusion."⁴ "Jesus the scandal becomes Jesus the caring helper, the wise teacher, the opener of new possibilities, and the one who welcomes all."⁵

That preacher I quoted a few statements ago portrays it as a difference between following Jesus around in Galilee and following him to Jerusalem. Here's how he suggests we might want to think of it in order to understand the different perspectives present in the exchange: "Do you know what Galilee is? Galilee is where

the living is easy. Galilee is where you go to workshops to learn how to be a Christian. It means weekend spiritual life retreats, bible studies, it means sitting in worship and listening to sermons. All these wonderful times where you just sit around with other people who agree with you and talk about what it means to be a Christian and what Christ means to me. Galilee is the land of small groups.

“I’ve been in church meetings where we have to go around, tell our joys and our concerns, especially when we are trying to get acquainted in a group. We do that in order to create a fellowship as soon as possible, because the Church is to be a fellowship. It works. You learn an awful lot about a person when they share their joys and their concerns. It gives us a chance to get acquainted at a deeper level. It allows us to pray for one another.

“There is nothing wrong with that. It is the way you do things in Galilee. That is where most of us started this journey, in Galilee. That is where most of us met Jesus for the first time, in Galilee. But there is a difference between following Jesus around Galilee, and following Jesus to Jerusalem.”⁶

And that brings us to the part of the story where Jesus calls the crowd to join his disciples and he spells it out for all of us – not just those Mother Teresa-wannabees – but all of us: “If any of you want to be a follower of mine, you’re going to need to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. Those who want to save your life will lose it, and those who lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What will it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your soul?”

None of us want to suffer. All of us would prefer it if all of life were able to be lived in Galilee. But, that’s just not the way life treats us – that’s not the hand any of us get dealt if we live long enough. Life has a way of putting on our paths things we know some folks have to deal with but we’re prone to think we’re never going to have to - things that we don’t plan for or train for or even want to have to deal with – divorce, disease, disappointment, death.

A second call – some refer to it as. Mother Teresa responded to the first call to be a follower of Jesus by becoming a nun. Her second call came when she was on a train on her way to Darjeeling in India, in 1946. Her second call was to minister to the poor and dying in Calcutta. It was the call to go to Jerusalem.

Leo Buscaglia tells about a time when he was teaching at USC when he invited a student dealing with depression to accompany him to a convalescent hospital near the campus. When they arrived the student asked Buscaglia what he was doing there. He noted that he didn’t know anything about gerontology.

Buscaglia said, “Good. You see that old lady over there on the bed? Go over and say hello to her.”

The student did. The lady looked at him suspiciously and asked: “Are you a relative?”

The student, Joel, said, “No.”

She said, “Good. Sit down.”

And they started to talk. She talked with him about love, pain, suffering, even her approaching death. She had much to share but no one had cared enough to listen to her.

Joel started going once a week to visit others in the convalescent home. He was so regular the residents started to call it “Joel’s Day.” Buscaglia said that one of the greatest days in his teaching career was the day he was walking across the campus and saw Joel, like a Pied Piper, with thirty old people stretched behind him, on their way to the coliseum to see a football game.⁷

Jerusalem: “whoever will lose himself will find himself.”

A young woman lost her husband during the Second World War. He succumbed to a tropical disease while serving as a doctor in India. She lost all interest in life.

She finally booked passage on a ship to return to America. Also on that ship was a seven-year-old boy who lost his parents in the fighting in Burma. The little boy was attracted to the woman but she would have nothing to do with him. She intentionally avoided seeing him. She couldn’t get outside of herself – outside of her sorrow – long enough to comfort a little boy in need. After all, she rationalized, she had her own problems.

The ship was torpedoed one night and began to sink. The woman thought it would solve her problems if she went down with the ship and so she went out onto the deck with that intent. The little boy was already on the deck. When he saw her, he went over to her and started to cling to her. He was shivering from fright and cold. Something came over her and she led him to the lifeboats. She got in with him and for the next several days, until they were rescued, he clung to her. Looking back on the incident in her life later, some of her friends said that they didn’t know whether the woman saved the boy, or the boy saved the woman.⁸

Jerusalem: “She who saves her life will lose it; and whoever loses her life for my sake and the Gospel’s will find it.”

The cross Jesus was referencing in this conversation with his disciples and the crowd isn’t the one of pop religion. It’s not simply anything we have going on in our lives that isn’t exactly the way we’d like it to be. It’s not the pain we feel about going bald or having a distant cousin who spent some time in jail or not having as much money as we’d like. The cross Jesus is referencing in this passage is that which we bear because we follow him – because we’ve decided to follow him to Jerusalem as well as receive from him – because we’ve decided to respond to a second call in our lives – on our journey of faith.

There are some who claim Christianity as a way to overcome the crosses of life. They claim that if you “get right with Jesus” everything else in life will be OK. You know, you’ll have all the money you want – you’ll not have any problems – you’ll be successful. Faith, being in relationship with Jesus, for some is the way to get what you want in life. One preacher calls this version of Christianity the “Jacuzzi Jesus” religion.⁹

There’s no way to make it pleasant, friends, following Jesus involves talking about the cross and living a cross-bearing life. Being a follower of Jesus Christ’s involves denying oneself and being prepared to take up crosses. Haddon Spurgeon, a great preacher from another era, put it this way: “There are no crown-wearers in heaven who were not cross-bearers here below.”¹⁰

The invitation of Lent is the invitation to take up the cross of Jesus Christ. It’s an invitation to come and suffer with and for Jesus. This is not an invitation to come and follow the Jesus of popular religion – the TV tube Jesus – the Jacuzzi Jesus – the one the masses come to be entertained by and seek special favors from – the

Jesus of Galilee. Christ invites us today to come to him prepared to deny ourselves, to cross-like living, to follow him to Jerusalem. What will our response be this Lent?

Let us pray.

Lord, it 's so tempting to rush to the resurrection - to talk about the new life on the other side of the cross - help us to sense the both-and-ness of the cross and resurrection - that the resurrection can be a daily experience as we put our lives on the line and bear the cross of this world. Give us the courage to say "yes" and to allow you to lead us where you would have us be and go. In Christ's name. Amen.

1. W. Hulitt Gloer, Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 73.
2. Mark Trotter, "This Is Not the Race I Entered," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2007), 0-000-0444.
3. Feasting on the Word, p. 70.
4. Ibid., p. 68.
5. Ibid.
6. "This Is Not the Race I Entered."
7. As quoted in Mark Trotter's sermon, "Get Lost," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2007), 0-000-0444.
8. Ibid.
9. As quoted by Leonard Sweet, "Quenching St. Anthony's Fire," Collected Works (ChristianGlobe networks, Inc., 1997), 0-000-115.
10. Haddon Spurgeon

