

Pentecost 16, September 12, 2021 (Mk 8:27-38; Is 50:4-9a; Js 3:1-12)

For eight chapters Mark has been describing Jesus' ministry with a sense of urgency. After three years of carrying out his mission to both the Jews and the gentiles, Jesus knows he's entering the last months of his life.

Beginning today, in chapter 8, he's heading towards Jerusalem. There he'll end his life on a cross, the Roman instrument of torture. He's well aware that his time with the disciples is limited, and he knows they really don't have a clue what his life and mission are all about.

For the rest of this sermon, *imagine you're one of the disciples*, on the move with Jesus. For months on end you've been dependent on the kindness of strangers to feed, clothe, and house you, and you've spent many a night under the stars.

You've traveled through Jewish and gentile country. You've watched your teacher and friend perform miracle after miracle. He's fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread. He's cast out demons and healed the mute, blind, and crippled—he even brought a dead girl back to life! He's walked on water and calmed the stormy sea.

And his teaching! He's always talking about the *kingdom of God*. He tells stories—parables—that make you stop and think: God's will is really different from the ways of this world! His favorite phrase is, **The time has come—the kingdom of God is near. Repent! Believe in this good news!**

He says this over and over, but you're still not sure what it means. What, exactly, is the *kingdom of God*? What are you supposed to repent of? And what's the *good news*? Is it all the miracles Jesus has done?

Now you're in northern Galilee, gentile territory. All of you are talking about the latest healing, of a blind man whose sight was restored, when Jesus interrupts to ask a question:

**Who do people say I am?** You stop and look at each other. One disciple says, **a lot of them think you're John the Baptist**. Someone calls out, **Elijah**. Another says, **some people call you a prophet**. By now you're all gathered around Jesus, there on the dusty road. He scans your faces and says slowly, **But what about you? Who do you say I am?**

You want to shout, *you're my best friend, I trust you more than anyone else. I feel safe when I'm with you. I know I'm loved, even though I'm unworthy. I want to stay with you always.*

You hear murmuring all around. Someone asks, *what does he want us to say?* Another wonders aloud, **could he be Elijah?** You hear words, phrases: *greater than Moses, and the greatest prophet of all time.* Then Peter, who usually speaks for all the disciples, clears his throat and says haltingly: **You are the Christ.**

You're not the only one who gasps. Could it be? The Christ? the Messiah? Messiah was the one promised by God, the one who would deliver Israel from all her enemies, He would redeem her from the shame of captivity and servitude. When Messiah came, he would fulfill thousands of years of yearning for God's chosen people.

Everyone's buzzing with excitement! Once it was spoken, you all knew it must be true. One of the disciples shouts in joy. He's so excited he can hardly speak: *How will you do it, Lord?* he asks. *What will you do to overthrow the Romans? When do we start?*

But—what's that Jesus is saying now? Everyone's staring at him in alarm. His words don't make any sense. **The Son of Man, he's saying, the Son of Man has to suffer many things. He'll be rejected by all the religious leaders in Jerusalem. His rejection will be so complete, they'll arrest him and kill him. But after three days, he'll rise again.**

You all know he's talking about himself—he often refers to himself as the *Son of Man*. But this is *crazy* talk! Peter takes him aside, and you can hear him scolding Jesus: **Lord, no way! This can't happen to you!**

And before you know it, Jesus has turned on Peter. **Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking like a human being, not like God!**

Now he's calling the whole crowd forward, ready to teach once more. **Listen, he says, anyone who wants to follow me has to let me lead. You have to forget your own wants. Deny yourself! What good will it do you to get everything you want, if you lose yourself? Your soul is more important than the things of this world. Don't run from suffering, embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how.**

James, our Lord's brother, speaks up. **Do you mean like, *love your neighbor as yourself*? Is *that* what you want us to do?** I mean, if I see someone who's hungry, it's not enough for me to say, ***come sit with me and I'll pray for you***. I need to give them food, and a cloak to keep them warm. **Is *that* what you mean?**

Jesus smiles. **Yes**, he says, **that's right**. **Treat everyone the way you'd treat the Messiah himself**. **Who knows, that beggar or leper might be Messiah in disguise**. **If you ignore the needs of the poor, the outcast, you're ignoring the needs of Christ**.

Someone from the crowd calls out, *Master, I have so little to give. What can I do?* Again Jesus smiles. **You can love everyone! Show your love by your deeds. And by your words!** **Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and even slower to become angry.**

**Tame your tongue**. **It's a small part of the body, but it can start a forest fire**. **Once a word is out of your mouth, you can't take it back**. **Words can hurt far more than stones**.

A man in the crowd speaks up. *Lord, you're right, we should be quick to listen but slow to speak. I spoke in anger to my mother last year. I was so upset with her I left her house and haven't returned since. My wife wants me to reconcile with her, but I'm so embarrassed and ashamed of my behavior, I can't bring myself to apologize.*

Now Jesus is absolutely grinning. **That's what I mean by *repentance***, he cries. **Your heart feels it, but your pride keeps you from acting on it**. **The time has come for *all* to repent!**

**Search your hearts and find out what's hurting you**. **Bring it into the light of God's love and let him shine his healing into your darkness**. **Why continue to live with shame and guilt when God is just waiting to forgive you?**

A young man steps forward, slowly approaching Jesus. *Lord*, he says, so softly you can barely hear him. *Lord, I want to follow you. I believe your teachings, and I want to know more about the kingdom of God—I want to **live** in the kingdom of God!*

*But my father forbids it. In our synagogue they're saying you have no respect for the Law, for the teachings of the scribes and elders. You heal on the Sabbath, and you eat with sinners, and you say things that are offensive. I'm really torn, because I know I have to honor my father.*

Jesus says gently, **Sometimes, you have to obey God's law of love instead of clinging strictly to the commandments. You *do* owe respect and obedience to your father, and to your mother. But your heart is calling you to a deeper faith than theirs. Always, *always* follow God's love, even when it seems wrong to others. You're not far from the kingdom of God!**

Then, to your shock, Jesus turns to *you*. **Friend**, he says, **you've followed me faithfully for many years. You listen carefully to what I say, you reflect deeply on my teaching, you wrestle with my parables. Your heart longs for healing, your soul longs to grow.**

**But you've been content to call me *friend*. To you I've been like one of the prophets—like John the Baptist or Elijah, someone who can show you the way. But I AM the way! I can give you what no one has ever offered before: eternal life.**

The look on Jesus' face is so tender, so filled with love, you begin to weep. *Jesus*, you say, *Jesus, I don't deserve eternal life. I've done too many bad things, hurt too many people, sinned too often. I'm not good enough for eternal life.*

Suddenly Jesus steps forward and places his hand on your shoulder. **You're right—but that doesn't matter. The life you live doesn't deserve eternal life, but God—my Father and yours—delights to *give* it to you. You can't save yourself, but if you let me, I can save you.**

He looks intently around the circle of his followers. Then he speaks clearly. **What about you? Who do you say I am?**