

## Seeing Jesus and the things of God

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### *Mark 8:27–38*

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27)

Caesarea Philippi, way up in the north of Israel, is where Philip, tetrarch ruler of Galilee, son of Herod the Great, built a city and a palace for himself, and named it in honour of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. That's why it's called Caesarea Philippi—the Caesarea of Philip. Vivien and I were there less than a year ago. The first thing we noticed about it was how far away it was from Jesus' normal circuit. At that time Jesus was based around the Sea of Galilee. This was eighty kilometres north of there. And Jesus and his disciples were walking all the way up there. And it was on the way to this place that Jesus asked his disciples, 'who do you say that I am?' and Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah'.

Caesarea Philippi was a centre of pagan worship. Philip the ruler built a temple here to Caesar Augustus, who by then was regarded as a god. There were also temples to Pan, the nature god, and Nemesis, the god of judgment, and there was a weird ritual that involved some Dancing Goats. So it was in the context of these powers-that-be—human powers, like Philip, and Herod, and the conquering Romans, and supernatural powers, the pagan gods and demons—that Jesus posed the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' And it is there, amongst all those powers, that Jesus is revealed, to those who will see it, as the Messiah, God's ruler over all the nations and peoples of the world and their rulers, and over all the powers of darkness (see Psalm 2; Ephesians 1:20–21; Colossians 2:15).

During our pilgrimage around Israel we saw ruins of the palaces and power centres from which Herod and the Romans exercised their ruling power. I was struck by how tin-pot Jesus and his disciples must have appeared before these impressive rulers with the power games they played. No doubt they thought they were onto the main game, and that they had much larger and more important things to be about—bigger fish to fry—than this pesky little Jesus movement out on the sidelines. Except that these power centres are now all in ruins, and their inhabitants are long dead, and Jesus is alive, and worshipped by millions around the world. Jesus is the one who is now ruling the destinies of nations, and the one who is now subduing the spiritual powers.

When Peter said to Jesus, 'You are the Messiah' (Mark 8:29), that's what it meant. 'Messiah' is the Hebrew word, 'Christ' is the Greek word, in English it means

'Anointed'. In Psalm 2 God says to his Messiah, his anointed king whom he has placed on his throne:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession (Psa. 2:8).

Paul later says that Jesus was shown to be this Messiah when God 'raised him from the dead and seated him . . . far above all rule and authority and power and dominion', because on the cross he 'disarmed the rulers and authorities' (Rom. 1:4; Eph. 1:20–21; Col. 2:15). So Peter was saying an enormous thing when he answered Jesus, 'You are the Messiah'. But it must have seemed a very incongruous thing to say in the midst of this little band of Jesus and his hangers-on, walking on the way to Caesarea Philippi.

So incongruous, that Peter could not have thought it up on his own. No human person could have. In Matthew 16 Jesus says to Peter, 'flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matt. 16:17). To be able to see Jesus as the Messiah from God, Peter needed a revelation direct from God, and he was blessed to receive it. The same is true of us. Paul the apostle says, 'no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3), and Jesus himself said, 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me' (John 6:44). Mind you, God our Father delights to show us Jesus as he really is and draw us to him—the Father says, 'This is my beloved Son!' (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). And when we can say from our hearts, 'Jesus is Lord, God's Son, the Messiah over all', then we are truly blessed, as Peter was.

But Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah didn't match with what he was looking at with his natural human eyes. What Jesus said next made it even more incongruous and nonsensical:

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 (Mark 8:31).

Mark tells us that Jesus 'said all this quite openly' (Mark 8:32). he wasn't talking in parables or riddles here. He was spelling out plainly, just as it is. What was strange or unexpected about this? A key to understanding who the Messiah is can be found in a promise made to Jesus' ancestor David, king of Israel one thousand years earlier. It's in 2 Samuel chapter 7. God said to David:

I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13).

God went on to say, 'I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me' (2 Sam. 7:14)—a very special relationship—which is why calling Jesus 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' amounts to much the same thing. Now, kings and rulers normally don't remain on their thrones forever, because they die, like we all do. So for this remarkable promise of God to come true, God in this Messiah is going to have to do something to overcome death. David picked this up, and he got quite excited about it—this promise blew him away! On the spot he uttered a marvellous prayer of praise to God (see 2 Sam. 7:18–29).

On this basis, that the Messiah would reign forever, there grew up an expectation that the Messiah, when he came, would never die. In John's gospel, when Jesus talks about how he is going to be lifted up on a cross to die (see John 12:32–33), people said to him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?' (John 12:34). No way would the Messiah ever die, and 'lifted up'—on a cross—what's that all about? How could that ever happen?

Note that here they are talking about 'the Messiah' and 'the Son of Man' in the same breath. Jesus accepted the designation 'Son of God', because of his intimate relationship with our Father God, but mostly he called himself 'the Son of Man'—the true human person. In the prophecy of Daniel 7, the 'Son of Man' is the one to whom is given:

dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
that shall never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13–14).

Same thing again: the 'Son of Man' is going to live and reign for ever (and incidentally so are all 'the holy ones of the Most High' who belong to him—that's us! See Dan. 7:22, 27). So why is Jesus saying here, 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed'?

Well, God had said just that the Messiah would live and reign forever. God didn't say that the Messiah would never die. So Jesus says here that he will be killed, and 'and after three days rise again'. And the apostle Paul says: 'Christ, being raised

from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom. 6:9). So God's promise holds. Only not in the way people expected. Maybe that's why, when Peter said, 'You are the Messiah', Jesus 'sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him' (Mark 8:30). Because they would immediately jump to the wrong conclusion—as Peter did.

Peter didn't hear the bit about rising again on the third day. All he heard was the bit about undergoing great suffering and being rejected and killed. And he didn't like it. None of us do. So why was Jesus saying this? Why was he going to have to die?

A couple of Sundays ago we were looking at what Jesus said in Mark's gospel about the human heart. The hardness of the human heart that has turned far away from God. The nasty things that come out of our sinful hearts, that defile us as human beings. If God is going to deal with that and change it once and for all, He's got an enormous job on His hands. How can God deal with sin and evil, and with us as sinners, without wiping us out all together?

One thing God said in 2 Samuel 7 in that great promise to David about his offspring was: 'When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings'. At the same time God also said, 'But I will not take my steadfast love from him' (2 Sam. 7:14–15). Much as we may wish it to be otherwise, there is punishment, and there is love. We may prefer to have the one without the other, but in a less-than-perfect world the two always go together: love and punishment, care and consequences—as any good parent knows, and as any good government knows (good governments still need police forces, and prisons). The punishment happened to a lot of David's successors over the years, up to the time when there was no descendant of David left on the throne of Israel—the nation had been taken over by foreign powers. That was still the case when Jesus came—the Herods and the Romans were in control. But in God's steadfast love Israel was still there, and God was still there—in Jesus.

How to turn the tide and put a stop to that endless cycle of evil and its terrible consequences once and for all? God said of David's offspring: 'When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings'. Jesus was the one human person in all the world and in all human history who did not commit iniquity—John the apostle, who knew him better than anyone else, said, 'he is pure . . . and in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:3, 5). Jesus' friends, and even some of his enemies, said the same thing (see Heb. 4:15; Luke 23:15, 41, 47; 1 Peter 2:22). But it was God's intention, in his steadfast love for all

His creatures, that Jesus should be so with us and for us, right where we are, as to be able to stand in for the rest of us and take our place when the final judgment came. Jesus was fully aware of this: in John's gospel, as he is about to go to the suffering of the cross, Jesus says: 'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world [Satan and the evil powers-that-be] will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:31–33). Jesus was there to take us with him into the judgment of this world, as he held us to himself in the embrace of the Father's steadfast love. And so to bring us out the other side—judged, cleansed, purified, justified, fully forgiven, restored.

That's what Jesus was introducing the disciples to when he told them here for the first time that he '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'. That he 'must' do that: it was a divine necessity—it was his Father's will (see Matt. 22:46, 56; Isa. 53:6, 10; Acts 2:23; John 14:31). Would God have chosen that, if there was any other way? This cross is the way of God, the way of steadfast love.

Peter didn't hear it that way. He didn't even hear the bit about rising again after three days. Peter, still in his sin, still with a guilty conscience, only heard the bad bits. Like we do. When our hearts are still a bit removed from God, our defensive guilty consciences make it hard for us to see what is true, and it can take God a little while to get it through our thick skulls? Peter here is still at this halfway stage. He has been given to see Jesus as the Messiah of God, but he won't yet buy this suffering stuff.

We shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves, or other fellow Christians, still in this position. There are believers who are committed to Christ, and have answered his call, as Peter and the other disciples had done, and yet who balk at any notion that Jesus suffered and died for our sins and that this was the will of God. We shouldn't be too tough on them, or on ourselves, when we come across that, because that is exactly where Peter and the other disciples were at this point. No doubt with the best of intentions, Peter took Jesus aside 'and began to rebuke him' (Mark 8:32). Let's give Peter the benefit of the doubt and say he did this out of his love for the Lord. But Jesus was not prepared to leave Peter, or the rest of the disciples, in that halfway place. It was vitally important that they come with him all the way. Because this is the way of God. So Jesus 'turning and looking at his disciples'—he included them all at this point—'he rebuked Peter'. What he said was, 'Get behind me, Satan!' (Mark 8:33). That's pretty strong, isn't it? Peter has gone from blessed disciple to devil in an instant! Well, Mark tells us that Jesus, immediately after his baptism, driven by the Holy Spirit, was tempted by Satan, and Matthew and Luke tell us what those temptations were. They were all attempts

to dissuade Jesus from the way of God, the way of the cross, in order to gain a following. So calling Peter 'Satan' at this point is not too strong. Enough, perhaps, to jolt Peter out of what he was trying to do. But the word 'Satan' also simply means 'adversary' or 'accuser', so Jesus may just have been saying to Peter, 'Don't you try and oppose me or stand in my way'.

And Jesus said to Peter and the others, 'you are setting your mind not on the things of God but on human things' (Mark 8:33). As long as we are setting our mind only on human things—however noble or otherwise they may be—we will never see or accept or enter into the deep and wonderful things of God. And Jesus did not want to deny that privilege to Peter or the other disciples, or anyone else. He was not going to allow them to remain in that position. Jesus was going to take them, an all of us, on to enter the deep and wonderful things of God. So:

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' (Mark 8:34).

What would that have meant to those who heard Jesus say those words at that time? The Romans crucified hundreds of felons. It was a regular event. All present had seen those convicted criminals carrying their crosses to where they were going to be nailed to them and hung out to die. If you were carrying your cross, you were on death row, you were on your way to the place of execution, you were doomed to death. Is that what Jesus was saying? Well, that's the track he was about to take, and he was saying that if we want to be his followers, we're going to have to go with him there, to that cross, into 'the judgment of this world', to be put to death there, to be finished as the self-centred sinful creatures we are. That's what Paul said happened to him. He said, 'I have been crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:19). We begin the true Christian life crucified, dead and buried. And a good thing too—we deserved nothing less—we wouldn't want to take these sinful old carcasses into the holy and glorious presence of God! That's what our baptism signifies. Paul said:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

For us, if there is no death, then there is no resurrection—no newness of life—neither here, nor in the life to come. If we have died with Christ, we will also live with him (see Rom. 6:5). This is what Paul calls 'the love of Christ' that now constrains him in everything he does: 'because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might

live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Cor. 5:14–15). We don't have a life of our own any more—'you are not your own . . . you were bought with a price' (1 Cor. 6:19–20)—we now belong to Christ. I knew a man [Canon Jim Glennon] who told me about when he gave his life to the Lord in response to an evangelistic appeal, and the evangelist came and held him by the hand and said, 'Are you sure you belong to Christ?' It's a good question. Not because you've made the right decision, but because you know Christ has laid his claim on you, and you've accepted that. And Christ is now at work in you. So Paul said, 'I have been crucified with Christ'—and yet here he is, still alive when he's writing this, but in a new way—he says: 'and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:19–20).

Jesus went on:

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 (Mark 8:35).

We could take that spiritually as well: if we try to keep ourselves and our life as we know it without changing anything, it will elude us, but if we embrace the changes that are required of us we will find a whole new life opening up to us. True as that may be, for many Christians what Jesus says here is a literal reality—they actually lose their lives. Here is just one example among many, that the Barnabas Fund keeps us well informed about:

Bassem Shehata Haraz fled with the rest of the Christians from his home town El Arish, North Sinai, in February last year, after a wave of Christian murders there. Unable to find work elsewhere, Bassam and his brother returned to El Arish in the summer, and re-opened the family shop. On 13 January this year the two brothers and a Muslim friend were stopped in the street by three armed, masked men. They spotted the cross that Bassem displayed and asked if he was a Christian. He replied, "Yes," and they immediately shot him dead. Please pray that God will comfort all who mourn for this 27-year-old and will speak to the hearts of the zealous Islamists who killed him, convinced that they were doing a good thing.<sup>1</sup>

Christians under persecution 'lose their lives' in many other ways: having their homes or their livelihoods taken away, their church buildings destroyed, being harassed or imprisoned or tortured, being rejected by their families and communities. It is good for them to have our prayers and support. Such sacrifices are not required of us as Christians in Australia at this time. If they were, we don't

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<sup>1</sup> BarnabasPrayer March/April 2018, p. 9.

know how we would respond—it is best not to think about it much beforehand, but trust we will be given the right responses at the time if it should happen (see Matt. 10:16–22). Meanwhile, we have plenty of opportunities to lay down our lives for each other and for those in need in the wider community (see 1 John 3:11–18). Even just being part of the church is not necessarily an easy option. When people say, ‘You must have great comfort from your faith in God’, Vivien and I would say that has not necessarily been our experience of Christian faith, or of life in the church—more often than not we have been taken outside our comfort zones into things we might never have chosen for ourselves. No complaints—we wouldn’t wish it otherwise—and in that we have been mightily blessed.

Jesus was speaking from his own experience when he went on to say: ‘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?’ (Mark 8:36–37). The devil had offered Jesus the world—on the devil’s terms—Jesus had knocked him back, and he maintained his integrity, and his own identity, as the Son of God. People might have expected Jesus as the Messiah to wield power like the Herods and the Romans—only on our side, so he could crush the lot of them! Nothing could have been further from the truth. Jesus came to serve with an even greater power—the power of God’s saving steadfast love—by laying down his life. And that is why he has outlasted the Herods and the Romans and all the powers-that-be.

I was up in the APY Lands in the far north of South Australia years ago—the lands belonging to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara peoples—speaking with a Christian leader in one of the communities there, and he told me his story. He said ‘I used to be a church man’. We all know what a church man is. Someone who does church things. ‘But one Easter’ he said, ‘I heard a preacher say that Jesus took away all my sins. And I thought, if he could do that, he must be Lord of all!’

Jesus asked his disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ On how we answer that question hangs our eternal destiny, in this life and the next. Jesus said:

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. (Mark 8:38).

And Paul the apostle said:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9).