

Determined Discipleship

or

***integrity is more
important than life***

a sermon by Dick Wolff based on

Mark 8 : 31 - 38

Integrity is more important than Life

Mark is very clear — Jesus is talking about a very real danger he is in. This talk about ‘taking up a cross’ is not just a dramatic way of saying ‘the Christian life can be a bit hard sometimes’. He is warning his disciples that if they stick with him they are putting their lives in grave danger. But he is also issuing a terrible challenge : it’s all or nothing. Don’t come with me and then get cold feet. Either turn back now and forget you ever knew me, or stick with me and be prepared for the consequences.

This event is happening in a real political situation, not a fairy story. Whatever Jesus’ gospel was, it was going to make him powerful political enemies. However, Mark also wants us to understand that Jesus is not being a politician. In the other Gospels, Jesus has been shown decisively *rejecting* a political career, which Satan is tempting him with. This is Mark’s equivalent of that story. Peter is reasoning with Jesus, trying to talk him out of what seems like a suicide mission, an act of political recklessness. “*This will not bring about the Kingdom of God, Jesus. It’s a recipe for failure.*” Jesus recognises the voice of his old adversary, and names it : “Out of my sight, Satan! You think as men think, not as God thinks.” Ouch! How long would I last in this church if I used language like that to challenge you?

Now I’ve picked up that some people think I get too political sometimes. It’s important to understand what politics is and what it isn’t. Politics has been called ‘the art of the possible’. It’s about living in the real world and making things happen. In order to make things happen you have to do deals, you have to make compromises. Whether you like it or not, you have to toe the party line. You have to promote yourself as a leader, you have to get power — and wield it. I could never do it, but I respect many of those that do and I get irritated when people think they’re being wise by slagging all politicians off. I remember a lady in my first church saying in Church Meeting saying “politicians — they’re all as bad as each other”. Her husband’s life had, a month before, been saved in an NHS hospital, and I remember retorting (and then rather regretting it) — “Joan, if it weren’t for politicians, Fred would no longer be with you”. I have never preached that we need to compromise or seek power. The gospel I preach deals with the key underlying spiritual questions. In fact, Jesus was accused of these two political ‘crimes’ of compromise and power-seeking.

The scribes, too, who had come down from Jerusalem, said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and, “He drives out demons by the prince of demons.”

Mark 3:22

At once the High Priest ripped his robe apart and shouted, “Why do we need more witnesses? You heard him claim to be God!”

Mark 14:63-4

Clearly the opponents of Mark’s Christian community were making Jesus out to have been an arrogant and failed politician, and in these verses we see Mark demonstrating that Jesus was neither arrogant, nor failed, nor a politician.

How many of you saw the two TV programmes on Nelson Mandela? Mandela is an interesting parallel to set us thinking. Mandela is of course very different from the Jesus of the Gospels. For a start, he chose the path of violence, and Jesus didn't. But there is a parallel in that Nelson Mandela valued the cause he was struggling more than he valued his own life, and he totally refused to compromise.

In the end, Nelson Mandela's huge *political* authority was not something he had fought for. He didn't expect, personally, to ever leave his Robben Island prison. He certainly never set out to become President. The *cause* was what mattered. His eventual political authority was handed to him on a plate by both white and black South Africans on the grounds of his overwhelming moral authority and personal integrity. He had refused to compromise with injustice one bit, at the risk of his own life. The words of the Gospel ring true. If I rewrote them for that South African context :

What would anyone gain by winning political power in South Africa at the cost of his integrity?

What could he give to buy his integrity back?

If anyone is ashamed of Mandela and his words under this wicked and godless apartheid system, the future leaders won't trust him, when freedom eventually comes.

based on Mark 8 : 35 - 38

It was fascinating to see the generals and admirals shaking the hand of Nelson Mandela as their new President. You could see their respect for him — and their nervousness! If he had been a mere politician, they would have been imprisoned, even executed, as a threat to the new leader. But that unwavering commitment to freedom and justice for all (whites included) without regard for his own life, and without bitterness, gave him such huge moral authority that the melt-down everyone feared didn't happen.

We can learn from that. The Church is not here to accumulate political power by making diplomatic deals. The Church is not here to save its own life. As Jesus bluntly pointed out : if the Church isn't being salt and light it's not worth saving anyway (*Matthew 5:13*).

We have one purpose, and one purpose only — to maintain our Christian integrity regardless of the cost. Life without integrity is not 'life in all its fullness' (*John 10:10*). (I suspect Jesus would put it much more harshly.)

That is why it is wrong for a Church to be formally linked to the State. That is why an abusive priest or minister is so devastating to the Church, because the damage one person can do to the Church's integrity in a cynical world is immense.

That is why it is hugely important for this Christian community to live out its message in its own life, and to back up its own prayers with actions.

No point in us, for instance, praying that the environment might be respected and the earth's resources well stewarded if we buy our electricity from power stations when we

could buy it just as easily from renewable sources. My heart sank at Synod last week when a finance bod got up and said they'd done a deal with one of the oil and gas-burning generators to get cheaper electricity for churches. "Get behind me, Satan! You think as men think . . ." Where's the integrity?

No point in us praying for an end to conflict in the world, if we can't manage to deal respectfully with one another in this small community. Where's the integrity? When the Christian Church really starts acting with integrity, the world will start listening. I really do believe that. But in the Church as a whole, we've got a long way to go. "Be perfect" said Jesus.

Nelson Mandela's cause was all too clear, and enviably simple to understand — freedom from blatant oppression for his people. (He was unusual in that he understood *white* people to be 'his people' too). For that cause he was prepared to die, and for that cause he would make no compromises.

We see something here of the meaning of the word 'faith'. "Faith", wrote the writer of Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1). Mandela is not a Christian, but we can learn from him something about what faith is. He was :

- *certain* that one day justice would come
- *determined* that one day justice would come

. . . regardless of whether he personally would ever see that day. This is faith; the assurance of things hoped for, whether we ever see them in our own life or not. It's a mixture of *certainty* that it *will* happen one day (many people think that is what 'faith' means) and such *determination* that it will happen that you're prepared to stake your life on it (and that is *not* necessarily what people want to hear, because that involves a personal cost). But miss that *determination* out and you have no integrity. *Certainty* on its own is worthless, and gives you no moral authority whatsoever. That's the point Mark is trying to make.

Paul was quite worked up about 'faith', as you know. In that letter we heard a bit of, he wanted his opponents to understand that Abraham was blessed by God because he had faith, not because he did all the right things. I can't get too excited about the 'faith' and 'works' argument. The two are inextricably linked. 'Faith' is not simply 'belief'. It is conviction that you stake your life on, and act by. Faith is determined, persistent, self-sacrificial yet confident *action*.

The trouble we have, as Christians in the rich world, is that the 'cause' for which we're supposed to be prepared to die isn't something as clear and simple as freedom for our own grossly oppressed people. I sometimes wish it *were* that simple.

So what *is* the 'cause' for which, as Christians, *we* are supposed to put our life on the line?

Mark tells us what 'the cause' is : it is "my (that is : Jesus') sake and that of the gospel".

“Jesus’ sake” — at the very least, that means not being ashamed of Jesus. Not dishonouring him by our words and actions. It probably means more than that, though, doesn’t it? Didn’t Jesus ask us to *remember* him, in particular by celebrating his ‘last supper’? The religious freedom to maintain this holy remembrance is something on which we cannot compromise, and for many oppressive régimes around the world that still causes difficulty.

But what of the other ‘cause’, for which we are called to die if necessary? The ‘gospel’, that is. What, exactly, does *that* call us to do? “Be nice, as God is nice”? “Generally not to do anyone harm”? I think we know that it is a lot, lot more than that (although we would be making a start if we could achieve those two!). To understand what ‘the gospel’ means involves having a clear picture of the Kingdom that is going to come, regardless of what we do, and then stubbornly living *now* as if it were already here, refusing to compromise with anything that might undermine it.

What God’s ‘Kingdom’ will be is another sermon I guess. But I could do worse than end with the manifesto for the Kingdom that Jesus (if Luke is to be believed) chose himself when he launched out on his ministry :

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the humble, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison; to proclaim a year of the Lord's favour and a day of the vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to give them garlands instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourners' tears, a garment of splendour for the heavy heart. They will be called trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord for his adornment.

Isaiah 61 : 1 - 3

Except that Jesus deliberately *omitted* the suggestion that God would take revenge on Israel’s enemies; and for that very reason he was drummed out of town. A bad start for a politician — but then, that was not what he was called to be.

Instead (indeed *because* of this) he remains with us as the source of supreme moral and spiritual authority. His refusal to compromise with whatever denies life and freedom is both deeply disturbing (because we know how compromised and ineffective we are) and liberating (because now we know that what drives the universe is a total love for all creatures).

But it is the *challenge* that this disturbing reading leaves me with this morning. For what cause would I be prepared to die? (That’s one of the standard questions asked of the week’s chosen celebrity in the Guardian weekend supplement, and I’ve often wondered how I’d answer it. It’s rarely answered well). For what cause would *you* be prepared to die? Do I live as if the Kingdom is at stake? Where’s the *passion* in my faith? And do I have *integrity* as a Christian? Because without it, I am already losing the meaning of life.