

## **Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – March 15<sup>th</sup> 2009**

### **Mark 8:31-38 Costly Grace**

In the Monty Python film 'The Life of Brian', which portrays 'Brian' as a reluctant Messiah, the makers of the film do however get one thing right – the sense of expectancy surrounding the Messiah, as someone who would rise up and march upon Jerusalem. Up to Caesarea Philippi the disciples passed by Gamalah where Judas the Galilean rose up in protest about the census of Quirinius. These 'assassins' and the Zealots combined in order to liberate the city. It was probably the disciples' recollection of this that prompted them to ask Jesus about being the Messiah, the one who would deliver them.

As soon as Peter uses the term 'Messiah' Jesus rejects the Messianic stereotype of victory and success, and redefines it in terms of suffering and death. Jesus does not take up a warrior's sword but a servant's towel. He will not inflict suffering, but give himself to suffer as a ransom for many. This is scandalous! Never has the chapter in Isaiah about the suffering servant been related to the Messiah in the minds of the Jews. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus! - indicating how wrong he thought Jesus was. What kind of Kingdom is this where Jesus is saying he is going to lose, and what's more he is inviting them to join him on his mission!

What Peter doesn't know is that suffering is the only way that Satan will be defeated. The problems of our world will not be undone by military or political leaders, though they have their place, but by the self-giving sacrifice flowing from the love, forgiveness and grace of God. Jesus came to give himself away. It is there in the suffering of the Son of Man that one understands the heart of God. Where this is unthinkable for Peter, for Jesus it is inevitable, where the religious leaders will justify their actions by the highest standards of law and morality.

But then Jesus asks his disciples and us also to reject the way of success and vengeance and self-actualisation and receive costly grace, that has a sense of a treasure in the field for which you will sell everything. We are not invited on a pleasant hike but called into risk, danger and servanthood, in the ordinary everyday things of everyday life – daily.

This is quite counter-cultural. Announcing Paris Hilton's 9 points to her guide to life, Ian suggested that this was mainstream culture that had even entered the Church. How different is this to the way of Jesus. In a mass of sensuality, leisure, media noise, bustle, trivia, who's in and who's out, what you're wearing – this is the greatest threat to the Church in the west. In Romania the church is under greater threat now with western materialism, shopping malls, television, the internet, and pornography than ever it was under Communism.

This life is incredibly brief, but people try to grab it all, and lose their life. The way of Jesus requires renunciation of the radical kind – total, comprehensive, with no compartmentalisation. Neither does Jesus expect perfection, but our call is to follow Him, to keep Him central. Persecution is a sign of God's opportunity, not His abandonment.

You can't buy this life, it's a gift – and then we must stay faithful.