

What does an invitation to follow Him mean
for us?

Mark 8.31-38

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Jesus began to teach (his students): "it is necessary that the Son of man suffer many things, that he be tried by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and found unworthy, that he be put to death, and that he arise after three days." He spoke this plainly.

The Rock grabbed him and started to rebuke him. But, Jesus, turning around and seeing his students, rebuked the Rock and said: "Take your proper place as my student, you satan, because you are not thinking God's thoughts; you are thinking like people (around you)."

And summoning the crowd, with his students, he said to them: "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself and lift up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to hold on to all that he is and has will lose everything, but whoever loses everything that he is and has for my sake and for the sake of the good news will hold on to what he can be and can have forever. For, what advantage is there if a person, who wants to gain everything else in the world, loses all that he is and has What can he use to buy back the world and everything that is most valuable to him (if he has nothing left with which to buy it back)? Beware: whoever understands himself to be dishonoured by his association with me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation will certainly be shamed by the Son of Man when he comes in his Father's glory, with the holy messengers (of God)."

A little over 5 years ago, my wife and I were at home enjoying a day off from our busy activities. Our girls were away and Jonathan was out playing on his new bike. The phone rang: the voice on the other end said: "there's been an accident; you'd better come over right away; Jonathan's been hurt".

I got in my car and rushed to the friend's house where Jonathan had been playing. I saw Jonathan's bike lying in the lawn, next to the ramps that he and his friend had made to practice jumps. Jonathan was sitting on the ground being held by his friend's mom, his arm covered by a blanket. I ran over to him. He was shaking, his face a little white, tears streaked his cheeked. I asked him what had happened. He told me that they had been practicing jumps on their bikes when he lost control and landed sideways. I said to him: "so you twisted your arm? It'll be OK." He said, with a weak voice: "No it won't, it hurts." I said: "well, when you twist something it always hurts, but it gets better." I was feeling relieved that all that had happened was that he had twisted his arm and nothing worse.

But, Jonathan insisted: "no, I didn't just twist it, Dad, look" At that point he took off the blanket that still covered his arm. His arm was straight to his wrist, but then it took an unnatural 90 degree turn outwards, so that his hand was almost perpendicular to the rest of his arm. And as if to confirm that his wrist was broken, Jonathan, shaking, drew my attention to the sharp, white piece of bone protruding from his skin, right where someone's watch might be. It was covered with gravel and dirt, but you could still see that sharp, dull-white piece of bone.

Not surprisingly, I started to shake then. My poor, little Jonathan. Oh, how it must have hurt him. I wanted to just hold him and comfort him. When the ambulance finally arrived, along with Rachel, and they tried to move him into the vehicle, he cried out. He couldn't even move his arm without crying out he was in such pain. I almost felt as if the best thing to do would just be to hold him, and comfort him, to tell him: "it will get better, don't worry". But, they did move him, and they took him to CHEO with his arm as immobile as possible.

Once there, though, there was more movement, more touching, washing of the wound, and of course the essential setting of the bone, and more details than I care to remember. Because, I didn't want them to hurt my little boy; I wanted him to be better.

Let me ask you a question: do you think that under my direction my little boy would have been better or worse off? I can tell you in all honesty now that I know he would have been worse off. His bone was broken; if we hadn't taken him to a doctor who would clean the wound and reset the bone, Jonathan might have died of an infection. His arm would have healed in such a way that he might never again have been able to use his hand. All I wanted to do was hold him, and comfort him, to tell him it will go away. That wasn't a bad thing. After all, that's what a child wants to hear from a parent, right? But it wasn't adequate.

Two weeks ago I spoke to you of how Jesus, when he first appears to the world as recorded in Mark's Gospel, allowed himself to be done to, and simply listens and sees. Before he acts, he will learn.

I suggested to you that it is important for those of us who want to follow our Lord in his paths of righteousness, that before we DO anything that we simply allow ourselves to be done TO and that we listen and see in the process.

But, there comes a time, once we have seen and heard, when it is also important that we act. Once Jesus had seen and heard, he went into Galilee preaching the good news of God and healing the multitudes.

Now some of us, followers of Jesus, will find listening and seeing hard to do. Some of us want to get out there and do something, right away, now. You will probably have found what I said two weeks ago incomplete.

For others of us, it is actually harder to move from listening and seeing to action. Some of us have absolutely no desire – thank you very much -- to get out there, risk something or everything when we've worked so hard for what we've got. We want to stay right where we are and make sure that thing never change. In fact, we're in pretty good company, even though we might not expect it. Even Simon, called the Rock, was like that. We are the ones who will find what Jesus has to say to us this week difficult.

Up to chapter 8 in Mark, the followers of Jesus had followed Jesus in his listening and seeing. In fact, they apparently had begun to enjoy sitting at his feet, listening. Jesus was, after all, a wise teacher, a bit like a Buddha, telling stories, giving his students puzzles to work out. Sure, the conditions of life were not always great, but, once they had given up their original jobs, they had grown used to this and had begun to find that it was a indeed a marvellous place to be! Sitting at the master's feet, soaking in the truths of heaven.

But, then, halfway into his ministry, Jesus began to speak to them about his leaving them, by force. He began to talk about how he would be taken (done TO now once again), arrested and crucified. He also said that he would come back from the dead, but who could possibly have imagined then that it would really only be 3 24-hour days later?

This was too much of a shock for some of them. And so the Rock takes him and tries to hold him back. “Jesus, what you are saying means that things will change, , that we won’t always be here WITH you, that EVERYTHING will be different! We don’t want that. You’re going to have to change your plans!” Just a few verses later, during the Transfiguration account, there he is again, asking Jesus for everything to stay just as it is. Just a bit of stability among the shifting tides of life, please, Jesus.

Some Rock!! Well, actually, he is a pretty good rock, immoveable, unchanging. Exactly what you want in a difficult situation, right?

But, that wasn’t why Jesus came into the world, was it? Jesus didn’t just come into the world to listen to the Father’s voice or to catch a glimpse of the Father in prayer. He could have maintained his heavenly glory, in all of its pristine purity if he had wanted to do that. Jesus entered the world to ransom the world from sin, and to complete that task, he called students to himself who would be like him in that ministry.

Nor did Jesus come into the world to heal a series of individuals during his 3 year ministry in a little corner of a little country in the Middle East.

Nor did Jesus come into the world, like some Middle Eastern Buddha, to gather his followers under a tree and marvel them with his wisdom and teach them deep thoughts.

Jesus came into this world to DO something: to give his life a ransom for many. And his students needed to learn that, too. They needed to learn that his life here was for a purpose. AND they needed to learn that their lives were, too!

And anyone who stood in his way was challenging him, as Satan had done in the wilderness, trying to get him to forget what he had heard from his Father and what he had seen, trying to get him to think about what people around him wanted him to do, just keep things as they are.

That’s what Satan had wanted, when he was threatened by Jesus’ entry into his land, the wilderness: don’t disturb my land, don’t touch my precious land, it’s mine and it’s all I’ve got.

That’s also what the Rock wanted: don’t shake my world now, I don’t want to lose the little that I have. And that’s why the Rock becomes like Satan to Jesus: don’t act on your Father’s word; act on mine.

As Jesus’ students today, we need to learn the FULL lesson that he is teaching us in Mark’s Gospel. **First**, we need to learn that without a clear vision of the Father or a clear word from the Father, any action that we engage in will just be our own human best efforts and wishful thinking. We will begin to do what WE think best, not what God thinks best and has shown us.

But, **second**, once we have seen and heard what God tells us, we must act, for failure to act or worse, to urge AGAINST action, is to be to Jesus what Peter was to him, namely, a Satan, back out there in the wilderness, tempting him to act against his Father’s wishes. Probably the last thing on our minds this morning is that we might be a Satan to Jesus. But, if having understood what the Kingdom of God is about, we are standing against the advance of the kingdom of God, no matter what the cost, we are just that.

Probably many of us know times when we have listened and heard, when we have sought to see and have seen. Probably many of us know times when we have been directed to what to do and what to say by God. Many of us have probably followed through, with Jesus; some of us may not have.

For many of us in the latter category, those who failed to follow through, our failure to follow through may not have been too serious in our eyes. Maybe nothing serious happened as a result of our failure to act: no one was hurt in any lasting way, no harm came to the kingdom of God in any lasting way. The divine wave of history simply went around us and we eventually caught up with it again.

Maybe.

But, maybe not, too!

What I can tell you is this: there are lots of people out there whose lives DO depend on people making tough, important decisions regularly and following through on them in action. And it makes all the difference in the world.

Would it have been adequate for the doctor working on Jonathan's wrist to have looked at the X-Rays and have said, "ah yes, I see that bone is broken, and isn't it amazing how the bones work. Let's just make Jonathan comfortable and see if the bones come back together by themselves. Or, let's just pray that Jonathan will get better." Others of us might be able to say that, and might even NOT want things to change because it's too scary. But not a doctor, who has seen and listened and knows what needs to be done.

Or how about a political leader who knows that there is a significant threat to his country, a person who sees a significant threat facing his world and sees and knows what needs to be done, but does not want to change the pace of life as we have known it. Does not want to risk what little we have, in case even that is lost.

You and I know that the word used to describe the actions of these people of good-will in the face of social suffering: the word is "appeasement", a word that means doing almost anything necessary to maintain peace, short of conflict and profound change.

Since the events of the 1930s and 1940s, we have come to associate the word "appeasement" with the diplomacy of Neville Chamberlain, whose words to Britain on the day of the signing of the pact between Britain and Nazi Germany were:

- "We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference, and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe."

Later that night at 10 Downing Street, Chamberlain spoke to the British people:

- "My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time... Go home and get a nice quiet sleep."

"Get a nice quiet sleep". What more could a father have wanted to say to his son, upon seeing his suffering, than "get a nice quiet sleep". What more could a people want from their national leader than to hear him say: "nothing will change; it will all be OK"?

But, I would have been foolish to have stood in the way of the doctors who knew better. We now know that Chamberlain was foolish and probably made matters worse by delaying treatment. And Simon, called the Rock, was not only foolish, but also Satanic when he tried to stand in the way of our Lord.

My friends, I am not arguing for action for action's sake or for action that seeks to show its power and dazzle the world.

- Yes, there are political leaders who seek to retain or build empire, to build up their own power.
- Yes, there are doctors who needlessly cause pain and suffering, perhaps because of some sadistic joy in causing people suffering or because of some megalomaniac belief "I can do this so I will".
- Yes, there are churches and there are Christians who believe that they can do whatever they want because God is on their side, so whatever they do is right.

I would say to them that they should remember the oath that doctors have sworn to uphold: "As to diseases, make a habit of two things—to help, or at least **to do no harm**." Obviously a doctor needs an accurate diagnosis before acting; a national leader needs solid evidence before going to war; Christians need to listen and see before deciding on a new direction.

But, taking no action is all is not an option either. Today, there are many people who look at the situations of need in the world and say either: "oh, it's not so bad; it'll get better" or "yes, I know your pain and your suffering; here, let me comfort you until it gets better" or "someone will come along to help you, I'm sure". Those who say such things seem to have no idea either of the real seriousness of situations in which people in the rest of the world find themselves or what it might really take to deliver such people from bondage, from evil, and from death. To desire to comfort is a good thing; but to comfort only when more is needed is what Hippocrates also called "**timid treachery**" in the face of real need.

What a world in need of peace, and of healing, needs to hear from the Christian church is "here am I, Lord, send me into action": not "oh, that's too bad; let me kiss it and make it better". What the world needs to hear from us are words of truth, spoken in love, words that say "here is what it will take for a lasting peace and I'm prepared to help". What they need to hear from us that we are prepared to go, even to suffer, to bring about that lasting peace. Whether it be in Ottawa, or in Nigeria, or in Iraq. Wherever.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus turns to his followers and says to them: "Here is what I am going to suffer. And one day, you will do the same. You will go forth and do exactly as I have done. You will offer yourselves, and they will take your life, and as a result, healing will happen."

We heard two weeks ago of missionaries supported by this church and of the dangers that they encountered in Nigeria. That same week, you will have heard the reports of the four Southern Baptist missionaries who were killed in Iraq. Where will the Lord send us?

Wherever it will be, if we have learned the lesson from our Lord, if we have listened and heard, looked and seen, then we shall go forth from here for Christ, prepared not to disregard war and disorder and the dangers that the world poses to us, but prepared to disregard the dangers of war and disorder in order

- to act to bring true peace,
- to fight for the true right,
- to offer ourselves in service of God no matter what the cost to ourselves, because we know the benefit to others.

You say: "I can't do this. It's too hard for me. You're asking too much." For my part, I can tell you that I have never forgotten the lesson I started to learn 5 years ago on an Ottawa lawn. Looking at a broken little boy, I listened, I saw. I knew that I, too, was broken and unable to help him. So, I made sure that at the very

least I did not stand in the way of those who WERE able to act. Holding him and doing nothing would have been so much easier, but it would have been so wrong. Preventing those who could help him from doing so would have been criminal.

And if you do hear the call from Christ to act, then do not fear: know that all of your actions and all of your works, done in Christ after having listened and seen what he wants you to do, will never, ever come to naught. Of this you have not my promise, but his.