

FOLLOWING JESUS: AIM: To emphasize something of what it may cost us to follow Jesus

TEXT Mark Chapter 8 verses 27-38

FOLLOWING JESUS- SETTING THE SCENE

During his ministry Jesus and his disciples travelled about a great deal. If we look at Mark Chapter 8 alone, part of which we heard read to us just now, we find that after setting out from Sidon - on the coast of the Mediterranean they walked in an Easterly direction over to the region of the ten towns (The Decapolis) on the east side of Lake Galilee. Mark tells us in his terse style that it was while they were there that Jesus fed the 4000. After that they went back by boat over the Galilee Lake to Dalmanutha, a village on the western side. Then walking north, they went around the lake and arrived at Bethsaida. Mark tells us that here Jesus healed a blind man; but that his sight was not completely restored at once. And that it was only after Jesus' had prayed over him a second time that the man could see perfectly. Then, finally, they walked for a distance of perhaps some 20-25 miles in a northerly direction up to the region around Caesarea Philippi. It's a journey which if made by car on the good roads of today might take perhaps a couple of hours. So, it must have been quite a tough walk for Jesus and his disciples.

Caesarea Philippi was a city situated on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Israel. It lay close to the source of the River Jordan. On present-day maps of Israel, you will find this area shown just south of the border with Lebanon and to the west of the Golan Heights, along the line of which runs the border with modern day Syria.

Today little remains of the city, the site being marked by just an occasional stone column, fragments of pavement and building foundations. All this is now set in a peaceful, wooded nature reserve with shady paths beside the Jordan. The River Jordan is little more than a fast-flowing stream at this point. In Jesus' time this place was a centre of pagan worship, with a grotto dedicated to Pan, a god imported during earlier Greek occupation. There was a temple built by Herod the Great and dedicated to the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. Philip one of Herod's sons had his palace there, and he had renamed the city Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the larger, more important city of Caesarea lying on the Mediterranean coast.

WHAT HAPPENED UP NEAR CAESAREA PHILIPPI

Why did Jesus want to take His disciples up there? It was such a long way from their home territory of Galilee, where he had now become well known, and which had been the main focus for much of his ministry thus far. Was it because they needed a break from the incessant pressure of the crowds that gathered so quickly around him wherever he went? Well maybe partly so. But there was another reason. Being up there provided an opportunity for serious discussion with little risk of being interrupted by crowds or of anyone else overhearing what was being said. It was there that Jesus took the opportunity to ask His disciples a couple of pretty weighty questions.

TWO BIG QUESTIONS

So during discussion he asked: "Who do people say that I am?"

To which the disciples replied: 'That you are, perhaps, John the Baptist, Isaiah or one of the prophets'

And Jesus then asked: 'And who do you say that I am'?

To which Peter replied -seemingly speaking on behalf of them all: 'You are the Christ'

The word Christ here is the Greek translation of the Hebrew for Messiah, meaning 'anointed'.

KEEP THIS TO YOURSELVES

Marks tells us that Jesus abruptly charged them to tell no one what he had just said. And that 'He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly'.

WHY WERE THEY TO KEEP THIS TO THEMSELVES?

The stern instruction not to pass this on to others was because if what he had told them were to reach the ears of the Jewish or Roman authorities there would be a risk that they would perceive him as a political threat and promptly dispose of him.

PETER REBUKED

At this Peter took him and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples he rebuked Peter and said, 'get behind me Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.'

Peter just could not understand this at all. Jesus might well be the Messiah. The one he and many of his contemporaries were longing and looking for. While Jesus was certainly not a military leader, when he spoke, he did so with authority and people listened. He could well be the political leader many hoped would free them from Roman oppression and restore the nation to greatness once more. Wasn't that the kind of Messiah scripture had indicated they were to expect? Peter and the others were deeply shocked.

This discussion at Caesarea Philippi forms a turning point in Mark's narrative. Jesus had now told his disciples starkly what sort of Messiah he was called to be and what that implied. From here on he would set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem, travel along the road to the south, down the valley, well beyond Galilee. It's a view, which as I have read, on a clear day is visible from Mount Hermon into the distance beyond the lake. As far as to where eventually the road turns right up the steep barren slopes and on to Jerusalem. Where Jesus would face rejection, arrest, accusation, condemnation, suffering and the cross.

In the second half of his gospel, we see Mark describing how from now on Jesus concentrated on teaching his disciples, in the hope they would at least begin to grasp some of the implications of what he had told them, for. Who he was called to be and do and why. What it all would mean for him, and also for them if, as he no doubt hoped, they continued to follow him. Mark's account makes it only too clear that they were painfully slow in learning what he was trying to teach them, so slow to 'get the message'. Perhaps rather as it is with most of us in our relationship with Jesus.

Our reading today concludes with Jesus saying this:

"And he called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, 'If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father and with the holy angels'.

Which no doubt raised disturbing questions for those disciples, As they do for us too.

*What are our expectations of Jesus? How do we perceive him? What makes him attractive, intriguing?

*Are our perceptions of Him way off-beam? Are we looking for the wrong Messiah?

*How much are we committed to follow him even if that may lead to misunderstanding, ridicule, suffering, persecution – or even worse?

* When he calls us, are we willing to follow, unconditionally?

How are you getting on with your walk of faith with Jesus? Remember, those disciples were not alone; they had company on the way. And so do we, and this can be a huge encouragement to us we journey on.

AMEN