

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 3rd

Reading: Matthew 16: 21 – 28 [13th after Pentecost or Ordinary Time]

That Jesus prediction of his coming suffering and death in Jerusalem are central to the Gospel story cannot be doubted when we see three (3) such in each of Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts [Matthew actually adds a fourth]. In the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on this Gospel, scholar Eugene M Boring notes that this is hardly surprising, "*in view of the first-century Jewish understanding that rejection, suffering, and death belonging to the vocation of a true prophets and in the light of what had happened to John the Baptist*" [Matthew, page 348].

We know too that Matthew's community is one in 'contest' with other religious groupings and powers; he sees this as a cosmic a battle between the Kingdoms of heaven and earth respectively. There is some experience of persecution in his community. After the witness of the cross and resurrection, Matthew, writing after Mark, is very likely drawing out the example of Jesus himself suffering for the community that would seek to follow. This may be written 'back' into the story, or at the very least, underlined in its composition to resonate with the audience for whom Matthew's Gospel is told.

The words "*from that time on*" in verse 21 signal a 'hinge' verse in Matthew's story. From here, the subject matter and tone change. Boring (above) points out that "*there are no parables and no public instruction*" and "*Matthew omits the crowds from the parallel narrative in Mark 8: 34*" [Matthew, page 348].

Peter has only just identified Jesus as '*the Messiah*' (verse 16) but is seemingly the one who now gets it wrong! There were long-held understandings of a 'One' sent from God. Peter correctly identifies, "You are it. That one". But what kind of 'Christ' does he understand? Bill Loader's "First Thoughts on Gospel Passages from the Lectionary" notes, "*there appears to have been some diversity in the way people expected the Messiah to act, with some emphasising the military and others the miraculous*". Clearly Peter has not got the right one as he goes on to resist the predicted suffering of his leader. Peter gets the right answer for the wrong reason! And he's in trouble for it!

However, Jesus' response points to the action of God. In predicting his coming fate, Jesus uses passive verbs for what will happen in Jerusalem: "*he must be killed and on the third day must be raised*" [verse 21]. Matthew's story is a theological account, describing Jesus' role in fulfilling what it is that God does. As the same commentary quoted above expresses it, [this is] "*God being understood as the hidden actor at work in the actions of human beings*" [Boring, Matthew, page 349]. Hence, Peter's protective response, Jesus knows, is thwarting the will of God.

For Matthew, Christological statements about who Christ is and the requirement of discipleship become one at this point. As is always the case, what we say about Jesus makes its own resultant claims on us; we cannot declare Jesus 'Lord' or 'Saviour' without that saying something about the living of our own faith and life! The Commentary being followed here puts it well: "*To believe in Jesus as the Christ and to live accordingly means to reorient one's life toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus, not that Jesus has some good advice on how to live*" [Matthew, Reflections, page 352].

Then comes five (5) separate sayings on the nature of discipleship. These are likely gathered here because they serve to re-inforce this message of Matthew at this point. In his "First Thoughts on Passages from the Lectionary" scholar Bill Loader writes of how self-denial is often misconstrued in Christian thinking. Instead of what has often been described as 'worm theology' ("Lord, I am but a worm"), Loader finds here a call to the true self, not the false identity which even in its very humility can sometimes be manipulative

or victimhood. He says, *“The call is not to lose self identity and so abandon one's responsibility, but to abandon the agenda for living which pits self against the others.”*

The final verse in this section has often been used to signal what is called the ‘immanent parousia’, Jesus coming again – and soon! Some New Testament books seem to anticipate it, even in their own author’s lifetime. Boring says it might not be necessarily so: *“What ‘some standing here’ are promised they will see before their death has been variously understood, some of the major options in church history being (1) the transfiguration, which immediately follows, (2) the resurrection; (3) Pentecost and the power of Christ at work in the church”* [Matthew, page 351].

There is an unfolding understanding evident here amongst the disciples, most notably Peter. At one utterance he is exactly ‘spot on’, speaking words ‘revealed by the Father in Heaven’ (verse 17). But no sooner than they have left his lips is he a ‘*stumbling block*’ to God’s purposes in Jesus. This echoes the ‘journey’ image of the Christian life, as Boring puts it, *“the meaning of discipleship is learned along the way”* [Reflections, page 352]. To quote him further, *“There is encouragement here for Christians who are concerned about past lapses (with more sure to come) and who are sure they do not understand as much as they should about the Christian life, just as there is warning for Christians who are sure they do understand and have no need to change their present conceptions of the way things are”* [Page 353].

Understanding these words in their original cultural context, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in their *“Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels”* note that *“Peasant societies, as a rule, are present oriented. There is little concern for the future unless it is forthcoming in something already present; for example, a child is seen as forthcoming in a pregnant mother, a crop in a growing field. Similarly, the coming of God’s benefaction mediated by the Son of man is forthcoming, in the generation of those following Jesus, before some standing there die”* [page 114]. The future, then, is fulfilment of what is already present in the now.

Jesus’ passion predictions and his seeming embrace of coming sufferings has given rise to theologies of suffering borne of these predictions. We all know that suffering will be a part of life. But the question behind Jesus’ words here is whether or not that suffering is for a worthwhile purpose. Much suffering is needless, the result of human folly or poor choices. Other suffering however, is given meaning by its cause, that which is elevated in our values. Bill Loader above writes of the impending fate, *“Jesus’ suffering receives emphasis because it is part of his obedience and provides a model for faithfulness of the disciples and doubtless of Matthew's hearers who also face adversity. The focus is not his dying for their sins”*.

In a success-oriented, efficiency-driven culture of our day, we too, are likely to get Jesus wrong. As Boring comments, *“Self-denial is not part of our culture’s image of the ‘good life’”* [page 352]. Many Christians would like to be able to recruit him to their purposes, make Jesus the guarantee of a quiet and happy life. But none such seems on offer. If we are to know the God whom Jesus makes known, then life in all its fullness beckons; in triumph and tragedy, in hope and despair, in triumph and failure. Respected Australian social commentator Hugh McKay has made this the subject of his book titled *“The Good Life: What Makes a Life Worth Living?”* (2013). Life, he says, exists in giving, in making a personal contribution. Suffering may figure in some form in that journey. We must be vulnerable to life’s every reward and risk.