

The journey starts (Mark 10:32-45)

Jesus' last journey (Simon Rea)

Sunday Evening 10 February 2008

Doctor: I have some good news and I have some bad news.

Patient: What's the good news?

Doctor: The good news is that the tests you took showed that you have 24 hours to live.

Patient: That's the good news? What's the bad news?

Doctor: The bad news is that I forgot to call you yesterday!

In these Sunday evening services, we've just finished hearing about good news: Good news for those who will listen. Good news for those who wait, good news of final justice and good news for those who search. Now this week, and for the next 5 weeks we'll be moving from good news to Jesus last journey as we travel with him and with the disciples back to Jerusalem, to the good news of his triumphant entry into the city and to the bad news of his death on the cross.

To the bad news of the cross? As 21st century Christians we can know that the

cross is good news because it stands for all that Jesus did for us. We know that the cross means life but for the very first followers of Jesus, the cross was first of all bad news. All they could see in a cross was the most barbaric punishment their Roman oppressors could mete out until the events of that first Easter changed their perspective once and for all. All of a sudden, the cross became good news for all who are willing to accept what it means. It's a bit like being short sighted. Without my glasses I am as blind as a bat. I can't focus on anything further away than about here [show]. But when I put my spectacles on, I can see really clearly. When a person turns to Christ and accepts that he is who he says he is, that he is the Son of God and that he died for them on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for their sins, then that person sees the world clearly, not through a dark glass. It's like putting on a new set of cross-shaped spectacles.

Over the next few weeks we'll be joining the disciples on the road with Jesus as they travel together towards Jerusalem and towards the cross. We'll be walking

with them before they put on cross-shaped spectacles. Tonight, at the start of our new sermon series, we'll spend some time looking through their eyes at each other and at Jesus. Our readings will help us understand how they saw Jesus as a good man, a great preacher and a strong healer for all they knew he might one day marry Mary Magdalene, for example, if you remember the Da Vinci Code- just like so many people today. But just like those people we know and pray for, the disciples only had half the picture. The disciples only had one half of the cross-shaped spectacles. They only saw the horizontal dimension, they only saw Jesus in relation to themselves and other people. Because they only saw Jesus in that way, they went on to make themselves look very, very foolish. Perhaps as we listen to the readings, we might see ourselves in them and perhaps that might just help us learn from their mistakes.

We'll start by listening to the first part of our reading from Mark's gospel:

Mk 10:32-45

Try to put yourselves in the disciples'

place. They'd heard something like those last words before. They'd heard something like that in their synagogues. They'd heard something about someone who would be raised up, whose appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness [Is 52:13-14]. They'd heard something like that before. The great prophet Isaiah had written about someone, someone special, a servant sent by God (42:1-9) to establish justice (vv. 1-4) and deliver those who are imprisoned (vv. 6-7). Hadn't Jesus been doing that? The servant in Isaiah's scrolls never drew attention to himself (v. 2). Jesus had never courted any kind of publicity, had he? The servant Isaiah wrote about was rejected, too, and that's what had happened to Jesus - even by members of his own family(49:(vv. 4, 7). 3 times the prophet had written about him. 3 times - no, it wasn't only 3 times, there was a fourth: full of details about what would happen to the servant, about the way he would be rejected and suffer unjustly, but also about the way his suffering would achieve something quite remarkable, something like salvation for his people, saving the people who had harmed him, something like

forgiveness for their sins. But only God could forgive sins, so the servant must have had a special relationship to God [á]as well as a special relationship to people[à]. How did that reading go?

Let's listen to it now: **Is 53: 1-12**

They all knew those words, did the disciples. They all knew what God had said to his chosen people, to their people, through Isaiah. But whoever the servant was, he had a hard task: misunderstood and rejected by his own people and with only God on his side...

The disciples all knew those words but none of them knew that they would soon find out just how the prophet's words would come out before their very own eyes. But as for now, they were all on their way to Jerusalem. James looked at John. John looked at James. James and John looked around at the others. What had their master been talking about? Whatever. Now was the time. Now as the time to take Jesus to one side and ask. It was a cold day and the others were lagging behind, dragging their feet and moaning about this that and the other. So

James and John sidle up to Jesus and pop the question: "Rabbi. Teacher. Could you do us a favour? Just a little one. That's right, just a little one. You won't say no will you?" And then the answer they'd been hoping for: "What is it?" "Can you set it up so's we sit next to you when you're the boss - you said you'd do it, didn't you?" Jesus didn't exactly tear them off a strip. That's what the others wanted to do, though. But only because they wished they'd thought of it first. Jesus didn't exactly tear them off a strip but what he said wasn't what they expected and it wasn't what they wanted to hear. Something about a cup and a baptism. Baptism wasn't bad. Wet, maybe but not bad. But the cup was a different matter. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel had all written about a cup, but that cup was filled with God's wrath, his just anger. They'd never seen Jesus put a foot wrong, so he couldn't have meant that cup could he? So the cup would be ok wouldn't it? So Yes, they told him, of course we'll drink it. Anything you can do...

By that time the others had noticed that something was going on, so they all piled in and gave James and John a piece of

their mind. It was not their finest hour. They were squabbling like spoilt brats again, just like they'd done in Capernaum a couple of days before. When Jesus had told them they needed to be like children, this is definitely NOT what he had meant! In fact this one of those pages in their book of life that they all would much rather have torn up and thrown away because it made them look like a bunch of scattering sheep, perhaps. Their eyes were fixed on the horizontal dimension.

But that episode is in the Bible, even though it shows the disciples in such a bad light. One of the reasons we can trust the Bible is that no-one in their right mind would make anything like this up. It just has to be true. Let's listen to the way Mark describes it now. As we do so, try to see things through the disciples' eyes and listen very carefully to what Jesus says to them at the end:

MARK 10: 35-45

Listening to this passage in a post Easter world, you'd think that the disciples had lost the plot. And it's not

the only one like it in the gospels, either. It may amaze us that the disciples could be so slow. But remember, they were still on the way to Jerusalem and Jesus was still with them. Despite their behaviour, Jesus still wants to teach them. He teaches with his words about himself, words which are rooted in their scriptures. When we want others to find out about Jesus, we need to be doing that too: telling them about who he is and what the Bible tells us about him. But he will also teach them by his actions as he has been doing all along. And we need to be prepared to do the same. That's why large-scale activities like Hope 08 or smaller ones like helping friends and neighbours are so important, bringing together words and deeds to bring others closer to Christ. In the last part of the gospel reading Jesus tells them how such things should be done: serving others with genuine humility, no matter what it takes. Discipleship is a self-denying, self-risking, self-giving just like life of the servant in that Isaiah passage. That was the pattern Jesus' life followed, too and our lives should follow his pattern. That's how we *should* be but sadly the way

the disciples acted before Jesus spoke to them, shows us how all too often Jesus followers have acted in the past and warns us against being too much like them!

We know we shouldn't be like the disciples were in this reading but every week we remember that in so many ways we are just like them. Except we don't have the same excuse that they had: We live in the post-Easter world. They were on their way to Jerusalem for the pain and the glory of that first Easter.

We have the whole Bible which tells us what happened then and which shows us how Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah wrote about the suffering servant and how he fulfilled so many other prophecies from their scriptures. They 'only' had the OT.

And each of us can have the Holy Spirit, the gift Jesus promised to his church to guide us and help us understand how everything works to the good of those who love God and how God calls, justifies and glorifies us as we are conformed to the likeness of his Son - despite ourselves.

We have all these advantages but despite all our advantages, we can still be as dense as the disciples were on that day.

So what can we do about it? We need to remember that there is more than just the horizontal dimension to our lives.

If we keep our eyes fixed only on the busyness of the horizontal dimension of our lives, we'll miss the glory of the vertical dimension of our faith. If we only see things horizontally, then the best we can hope for is to be like the disciples on that road to Jerusalem - or like other people who don't know Jesus as their personal saviour.

The vertical dimension is all about our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. We live in the created world but because of Jesus, because of what he did on the cross, we can have a special relationship with the world's creator. But there is a danger if we only focus on the vertical dimension, too. If we did that we could run the risk of hiding from the world and living only in a holy huddle. But that wasn't Jesus' way - and so it shouldn't

be ours, either. If we want to live the full lives Jesus offers us, then we need to keep seeing things both vertically and horizontally.

How can we do that? Let me suggest a Lent resolution: Put on cross-shaped spectacles! Keep the vertical perspective going by making extra time for Bible reading and prayer. If you want to give something up, give up 30 minutes of TV time and spend it reading the Bible. Perhaps you might want to take time out to study the ways the gospel writers write about the disciples on that journey to Jerusalem. Keep the vertical perspective open by communicating with God more often, too: Pray for people you know to come to church. You might also want to make time to pray for Hope 08, too, as churches unite to proclaim the kingdom in word and action this year. Perhaps as you do that, the Holy Spirit may put it on your heart to find a new way to serve God by helping others. Cross-shaped spectacles may help you see that more clearly. But keep the horizontal perspective open by talking to your friends about your faith, too. You might even want to invite them round or

even to come to church with you.

Jesus didn't tear his hair out and send his followers home after what happened on the road that day. He continued to serve them as long as he could, showing them how to serve others through his words and his actions. The Book of Acts and the history of the Early Church show us how Jesus' followers went on to follow his example with their words and deeds in ways more glorious than they could never have imagined. Jesus doesn't change, he continues to call and send his followers to be like him and that includes us here tonight. As we go out to that tonight, let's try to see things as he did, vertically and horizontally, through the perspective of the cross. Tonight, as you leave, put on cross-shaped spectacles and see the world through his eyes. AMEN.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen