

# St. Matthew's Church

## NEW YORK CITY

### **CONFESSING CHRIST**

**Mark 8:31-38**

**Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2009**

In today's Gospel lesson from Mark presents the turning point in Christ ministry and from now on all events move toward Jerusalem, the betrayal, the whipping post, and the bloody Cross. And the text centers around Peter's confession of Christ, and explains what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah and what it requires to be identified with Him. As such, it is the greatest practical importance what we must understand and embrace for ourselves if we are to be His disciples.

Jesus and his disciples were on the road somewhere among the tiny villages surrounding the city of Caesarea Philippi when He asked two questions: "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." The average people "on the street" thought He was great. They were impressed with His prophetic character, but did not have the slightest idea that He was the Messiah. And then Jesus asked the second question: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Peter answered for them: "You are the Christ." In the Gospel of Matthew there is the joyous response: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what ever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This was a tremendous affirmation! The meaning of what Peter had said, was not to give Jesus another name (that is, Jesus is not a first name and Christ a second name) "Jesus is the name of God's son, and "Christ" is his title. "Christ" is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew title "Messiah" and means "Anointed One." Peter's identifying Jesus as the

Christ, the Messiah; the Anointed One meant the disciple believed that Jesus was the One Israel had been waiting for since the time of David.

Jesus now set about instructing the disciples, and in doing so taught them something which in their wildest imaginations they had never dreamed: namely: He was to be a suffering Messiah. “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this.” They were appalled, but they all kept their silence, all except one: “Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.” Peter could not fathom how and why his Messiah was to experience such humiliation. Peter believed, as did many with him that Israel’s Messiah had come for glory, not suffering. The Messiah would restore the nation to its power and prestige of old. Peter didn’t want to hear of suffering and killing unless it applied to the Romans and other unbelievers.

Jesus’ response left no doubt that such thinking was at cross-purposes with God’s will: “Get behind me, Satan!” “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Peter had become the unwitting carrier of demonic doctrine, parallel to that which Christ faced in the wilderness when Satan tempted Him to abandon the Father’s will and seek an easy Savior-hood. To that He responded, “Away from me, Satan!” That had been a terrible temptation for Jesus because He knew that horrors awaited Him. So Jesus said if you think that way; “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.

If we are to confess Christ, we must embrace a suffering Messiah, a God no one would ever have thought of. Taking our suffering Savior into our heart and loving Him may come far easier now, this side of the Cross, after His death and resurrection, but there is something more that is required. We must embrace His example as a model for living, and this is not so easy.

**The Christian Lifestyle:** Confessing Christ means we must follow Him to crucifixion. “Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” There is the most startling honesty of Jesus. No one could ever say that they were induced to follow Jesus by false pretences. Jesus never tried to bribe anyone by the offer of an easy way. He did not offer men and women peace; He offered them glory.

A cross comes from specifically walking in Christ's steps, embracing His life. It comes from bearing disdain because we are embracing the narrow way of the Cross; that Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life." It comes from living out the business and sexual ethics of Christ in the marketplace and the world. It comes from extending oneself in difficult circumstances for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus never sought to lure men of Him by the offer of an easy way; He sought to challenge them, to waken the sleeping chivalry in their soul, by the offer of a way than which none could be higher and harder. He came not to make life easy but to make men great.

Our crosses come from and are proportionate to our dedication to Christ. Difficulties are not an indication of cross-bearing; difficulties for Christ's sake are. We need to ask ourselves if we have any difficulties because we are following close after Christ.

There is another personal effect of confessing Christ: embracing the paradox of the Cross. Jesus said further: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Jesus said; "Losers are keepers." This is a fundamental law of life. No one is accepted, in time or eternity.

Nothing could be more opposed in the spirit of our age. The world today says; "Look out for number one. Save yourself. Love yourself. Pamper yourself. Love for yourself." Narcissism is the order of the day as multitudes ease their souls into living death by the respectable vice of selfishness. A society of keepers inevitably becomes a society of losers. Ours is a society of losers!

When the cross is our life's purpose, along comes the lifelong invitation to carry it. Oddly, however, that binding commitment brings a measure of great freedom. For when the cross is our purpose, we are freed from wondering what life is all about. Our direction in life becomes clear: to serve God and love others as Jesus did. To live that out you don't have to be a renowned pastor of a stellar example among the people. Every moment of everyday life, at work, among family, with friends, can be directed to living and loving with no strings attached save the one that fastens us to the life and love of Christ. Best of all, as we lose life for Christ's sake, we discover it anew eternally in the purpose of the Cross.

Do we believe this? If we do, we are swimming against the stream of our culture. But we will not be sorry! “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” We must confess Christ as the suffering Messiah and Savior. We must embrace the life He exemplified and calls us to. If we confess Him, the Son of Man will rejoice in us.

We must unhesitatingly say yes to the voice and the command of Jesus Christ. We must be able to say with Paul that it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him. He lives no longer to follow his own will, but to follow the will of Christ, and in that service we find His perfect freedom.