



“Caveat Emptor”

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Mark 8:31-38 (ILL)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The trouble with Jesus is that he turned out to be a different kind of messiah than most people wanted.

The Hebrew prophets, for example, imagined a messiah who would be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. They imagined a ruler who would conquer Israel’s enemies and reunite their divided kingdom. They imagined a progeny from the line of David, who had all of the king’s good qualities, and none of his bad ones. For all intents and purposes, if the ancient prophets had had their way, the messiah would not have been a human being; he would have been God in drag.

I repeat—the trouble with Jesus was that he turned out to be a different kind of messiah than most people wanted. He turned out to be a different kind of messiah than the prophets wanted. And, as we learn in today’s gospel reading, Jesus turned out to be a different kind of messiah than the disciples wanted.

Jesus turned out to be a mendicant rather than a monarch, a lover not a fighter, a host to strangers, a friend of outcasts, and a healer of the sick. He also bore his cross, and said that his followers would have to bear theirs/ours too.

Jesus and his message were popular at first, but things started to go sideways when the religious mucky-mucks got wind of his reform movement, and when he put his followers on notice that he wasn't participating in anyone’s popularity contests.

By contrast, Jesus said in essence that he was leading a reform movement that challenged Israel to reclaim the prophetic life over priestly rituals, that his message and witness would extract a high price, and he and his followers would pay dearly.

Knowing that the journey through life and Lent is filled with snares, we seek God's guidance and prepare our hearts and minds for the reading of scripture by singing together our musical meditation.

MUSICAL MEDITATION "Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer"¹ (v. 1) **No 18**

***Guide me, O my great Re-deem-er, pil-grim through this
bar-ren land; I am weak, but you are might-y;
hold me with your power-ful hand. Bread of heav-en, bread of heav-en,
Feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.***

SCRIPTURE READING

Lisa Pemberton

Mark 8:31-38 (ILL)²

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Human One must undergo great suffering, 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. And Peter took Jesus, 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 God's side, but on the human side."

And Jesus summoned the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who would save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it. For what is one profited, if one gains the whole world and forfeits one's life? For what shall one give in return for one's life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one will the Human One also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of God with the holy angels."

SERMON

"Caveat Emptor" The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Consider if you will, a modern rendering of today's gospel text.

In this imagined setting, Jesus is an emerging political leader, and Peter, his side-kick, is his newly hired press secretary.

During the first 100 days of Jesus' campaign, things were going pretty well. He garnered quite a following without even trying. Audiences were impressed by his eloquent speeches and capacities to heal the sick and raise the dead.

The number crunchers and the pollsters reported that rally attendance, donor contributions, public opinion, volunteer enlistment, and speaking invitations were up.

¹ Text: John Huges. Public domain.

² National Council of Churches, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year B*, New York: 1984.

Peter was pleased with the results, and began to imagine a very bright future for Jesus—and for himself. He imagined growing popularity, job security, economic prosperity, name recognition, and a prestigious position in Jesus' inner circle after the big win. After the first term, maybe there would be a second, and then surely there would be offers for consulting engagements, lectureships, and more.

By all accounts, the campaign was off to a great start. But then Jesus started making speeches like the one we heard in today's gospel reading—speeches about self-denial, taking up crosses—speeches about hardship, rejection, and death.

Peter was not impressed. He took Jesus aside and scolded him saying something along these lines: “Jesus, what are you doing? You're screwing things up! You're off message. This stuff about cross-bearing is not in our communications plan. It's not in the talking points that we discussed. How do you think we're going to meet payroll and pay travel expenses, much less keep gaining momentum in the polls and win this campaign, if you keep talking about crosses?”

Jesus didn't even blink. He knew that Peter was clueless about who he was or where his campaign was headed. So he decided to make an example of Peter in front of everybody.

Jesus said to Peter, “I am not running a popularity contest here. I am not promising free lunches. My campaign platform calls for courage in the face of challenge, and sacrifice in order to achieve our goals. Anyone, including you, who is promising something for nothing, is working for the devil. No pain, no gain. No cross, no crown.”

Though Jesus reiterated his caution about the challenges ahead two more times before he was arrested, virtually no one got the message about the cross—at least not until the end—not until Gethsemane.

The radical nature of Jesus' message about crosses was lost on his first followers, because they didn't want to get it.

The disciples wanted Jesus to be a different kind of messiah than the one that he turned out to be. They wanted him to be above temptation and trial. They wanted him to be unscathed by suffering and death. Most of all, they wanted him to take up their crosses, and protect them from earthly hardships.

In the end, Jesus experienced suffering and death, and his disciples and apostles did, too. He didn't—and maybe he couldn't—protect them from hardship, but he did give their experiences of suffering new meaning. He did give their lives new purpose. And they, in turn, gained strength in the struggle and a sense of hope that the world could not give or take away.

To be sure, the radical nature of Jesus' mission and message are lost on many, including many modern Christians, because we too long for a messiah that's above temptation and trial, that foregoes suffering and death, and that is able to prevent or take away any cross that we would bear.

We also miss the radical nature of Jesus' message, because we live in a nation that grants us religious freedom, where Christianity is the dominant religion.

Historically and cross-culturally, whenever and wherever Christianity has become the dominant religion, it has achieved that place in part by being domesticated, meaning toned down, in order to legitimize or at least not to challenge a particular society's way of life. As a result, citizens in Christendom no longer hear the radical nature of the prophets, the edginess of the gospels, or the challenge of the apostles, and Jesus ends up seeming like a nice guy whose niceness ought to be emulated.

But the truth be told, the gospel that Jesus preached was a radical gospel, and the life that he lived was a clear and courageous message that makes modern examples of love and justice pale by comparison with his life and teaching.

To read today's gospel lesson then with our eyes wide open is to receive it with a sense of awe and trepidation, and to be clearer about what we and others are called to embrace when we walk into the doors of the church, or blow the dust off of our Bibles and read them.

I am reminded, for example, that the inscription over the narthex door at The Old South Church in Boston, where I once served, reads: "Behold, I set before thee an open door." This quotation from Revelation 3:8 is a lovely, welcoming message that we might expect of a progressive urban church.

Much as I love this greeting, much as I love Old South, and much as I'd love to see similar notices over every church door, the thought occurs to me that we might be truer to the gospel and more disclosive with prospective worshipers if our doorway inscriptions read: "Caveat emptor!"

(For those who slept through Latin class, or who were spared the assignment of learning dead languages in school, the English translation of "Caveat emptor!" is "Buyer beware!")

Annie Dillard makes a similar point about the radical nature of the gospel and the powerful vortex of God's call in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Here Dillard writes (and I quote):

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a

Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offence,³ or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.³

So here we have it—the unvarnished truth about Jesus and his message. He was not the messiah that most people expected or wanted. He may not even be the messiah that we were or are hoping for. But he is the one we need.

Jesus was human. He bore a cross, perhaps many. He didn't promise good times; he promised good news.

As a consequence, Jesus knew (and knows) what it was and is to suffer with his followers—ancient and modern. His mission and ministry point us to a victory beyond suffering and death. And he grants us strength in our struggles, and a hope that the world can't give or take away. This is very good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988) p. 40.