

### ***What would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?***

The Gospel for this Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, is not easy on the ears. Mark 8:27–38 is frankly a very verbally abusive passage. Three times Jesus or Peter tells the other to “shut up” (*epitimaō*): the same verb that stifles demons and a gale in other passages in Mark. For the first and only time in Mark, Peter and peers recognize their teacher, but Jesus commands them to say nothing to anyone (8:30). After Jesus plainly explains to them all that the Son of Man must suffer, Peter shuts him up (8:32). “Turning and seeing his disciples, he shut up Peter: Get behind me, Satan. You’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:33). Only here in Mark does Jesus address an adversary as Satan—and it’s, Peter, the first of the Twelve..

The language grates, not just because the stakes are life and death, but because Jesus upends everything we expect a messiah to be and to do for us. First-century Jewish messianic hopes varied, but none of them expected a messiah crucified by elders, chief priests, and scribes. Old Testament writings dreamt of idealized rulers who would judge the wicked and restore Israel’s righteous. None of these messiahs handed their followers a cross to be shouldered en route to their own Golgothas. In no Gospel does Jesus say, “It is my responsibility to die for you, while you applaud my heroism.” Instead: “The Son of Man is ordained by God to suffer, die, and be raised. And so are his followers. Are you coming?”

One of the ways modern Christians sashay around this question is to trivialize the cross. Crucifixion was an instrument designed for its victims’ utter degradation and excruciating torture: capital punishment so vile that it appalled even tough-minded politicians. “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him, an abomination. To slay him is virtually an act of murder. To crucify him is—what? No fitting word can possibly describe a deed so horrible” (Cicero).

Need an example? In 1993 The New Yorker reported on Macy’s Cross Culture: a boutique, purveying “trend-type crosses.” Here you could shop for a fist-size cross covered with gold hobnails or “one with a cameo in the center surrounded by purple, green, blue, and pink semi-precious stones ... with an extra-long antiqued-silver chain, so it can be slung, shoulder to hip, bandolier style, which, by the way, happens to look great with a crushed-velvet catsuit and little biker boots.” Is this the cross of Christ; the one we are to take up and follow him? Hardly!!

“For whoever would save her 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 person, to gain the whole world and forfeit one’s life? For what can a person give in return for one’s life?” (Mark 8:35-37). In what ways do we pretend that Jesus didn’t mean this, or try to be our own messiahs and save ourselves? On what do we stake our lives? In what do we ultimately place our trust? Our bank accounts? Achievements? Prestige? Politicians? Run down the entire list, and what do you get? Doctrinal confusion is not our fundamental problem. Instead, it is disobedience: our refusal to accept Christ’s authority over our lives.

Lay your ear upon Mark’s page and listen for the wail of lament: the steep price paid for following Jesus. In Mark 8:38 the only guilt suffered by a true disciple is being ashamed of Christ: abandoning his way for the values of “this adulterous and sinful generation,” “setting one’s mind on this world’s things.” We know what is asked of us as disciples of Christ. And yes, we will often fail in walking that path, but failure needn’t be the enemy of aspiration. We know the way. Other disciples walk it with us. Jesus remains in the lead.

***What would you give? What would you give?  
What would you give in exchange for your soul?  
O if today God should call it away,  
What would you give in exchange for your soul?***

***Mercy is calling you, won’t you give heed?  
Must the dear Savior still tenderly lead?  
Risk not your soul, it is precious indeed;  
What would you give in exchange for your soul?***

***More than the silver and gold of the earth—  
More than all jewels thy spirit is worth!  
God, the Creator, has given it birth!  
What would you give in exchange for your soul?***

F. J. Berry / J. H. Carr (1936)