

MARK 8:31-38
THE PATH TO LIFE

Crossroads: have a look at the picture; we can use it for a moment to think about life. There are four directions; one of them can ask the question “where have you come from?” That could be the place you were born; or the work you do or did; your relationships with your family or friends; what happened in the last week; these are some of the things that have shaped you in the past; where have you come from? One of the other crossroads points could help us answer the question “Where are you heading?” What does this week hold for you, the places to go, the people to meet, the things you have chosen to do? Or it may be a question about life in general: what direction is life taking; what work will you do; are there new relationships to form, or new responsibilities that you’ve chosen to take on; are these a change in direction for you? Which turnings are you choosing not to take? Was there a job opportunity that you turned down because it doesn’t seem right for you? Are there some other choices you make that might end up as roads not taken? Life is full of these choices and we hardly notice them; there are times, however, when life has big crossroads moments, significant choices and we choose which life-paths we take. Some choices are forced upon us and life takes directions we hadn’t anticipated, some are good, some we find hard.

The Via Dolorosa – this is the route that Jesus is said to have taken from Pilate’s house on the way to Calvary, literally the way of the cross for Him. There are different opinions as to the exact route this should take, but basically this is the way of the cross, hence its name “the way of sorrow”. Jesus carried the crossbar of His cross along this route and stumbled and fell along the way; He was helped by others. Now the Via Dolorosa has fourteen stations of the cross along the route telling the story of Jesus on His way to the cross and this route has become a pilgrim path, with other people following in Jesus’ footsteps, quite literally, and reflecting as they go on Jesus’ journey to the cross and what that would mean for us.

The passage in Mark chapter 8 is a crossroads moment for Jesus; it is even more so a crossroads moment for His friends. Jesus has come from Nazareth; He has been baptised by John in the Jordan; God has declared Jesus His Son “*Whom I love*” and Jesus has begun His ministry. He has healed sick people of all sorts; He has taught people all kinds of wise things and people have marvelled at His incredible wisdom. But now, perhaps for the first time, He has spoken about the cross and dying. Jesus probably understood that the cross was His way from the very start and would allow nothing to side-track Him from that path, but here, now, for the first time, He spells it out to His friends: “*He began...*” (Mark 8:31) “It is necessary that...” these things take place; there is no beating about the bush on this matter; the key path for Jesus to take is the path that will lead Him to the cross and to suffer and to die. The cross was at the heart of Jesus’ mission; it is what He came for, and is not just a bad thing that God used for good.

It was a crossroads day for Jesus’ friends too and to begin with they are not happy! “*He spoke...*” (Mark 8:32f) Peter told Jesus He was wrong! You can almost see Peter put his hand on Jesus’ shoulder and gently guide Him into the corner of the room, away from the others, out of earshot and then begin to scold Him. “Don’t be daft; this is not for you; this won’t happen to you; you’re too good for that; you can use your power to defeat evil; you can overcome!” Peter is earnest in saying this; he really believes that this is a wrong turning for Jesus; this path is not the path for Jesus to choose and if He goes this way, then He has gone wrong somewhere along the way. This is not Peter’s best moment: “*Get behind...*” (Mark 8:32) Jesus begins to show Peter and the others that His path is the way of the cross; this is God’s way for Him and He must walk it. “It is necessary” for Him to walk the path of the cross.

That’s the view from one side of the cross, Jesus’ commitment to go there. In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul gives us the view from the other side of the cross; it has become the great theme of the gospel that he preaches. “*I resolved...*” (1 Corinthians 2:2) What is the heart of the Christian

preacher's work? For Paul, the heart of the preacher's work is to tell people about Jesus, especially His cross. The cross was the place where everything changed: God's relationship with us is sorted; our relationships with each other are put on a new footing; we see the world through different eyes; Jesus is Lord of our lives. That begins with hearing about Jesus and His cross; the Spirit of God persuades us that Jesus is worth believing and His power is at work when the preacher does his or her job. It is not the wise, erudite words of the preacher that makes a difference, but the message of the cross that builds God's kingdom in the world. Jesus knew that everything would centre on the cross; He knew it was necessary; He knew He had to walk that path.

Fluorescent crosses in South Korea, large wooden crosses in the front garden of church buildings, small gold crosses around your necks; how many places can you see them in this building? – the cross has become the symbol of the Christian faith. It is strange, if not bizarre, in one way because the cross was a brutal place, a place of execution; there was nothing nice about the cross and it wasn't meant to be nice; it was the place where the Romans got rid of people they found guilty of heinous crimes; Jesus called Himself a King, but there was no King but Caesar, so the traitor had to die. It is strange that this brutal place has become the symbol of Christian faith. But in another way, it is not strange at all – the cross is the centre of God's plan to save the world; the cross is the centre of Jesus' mission in the world; the cross is the place where Jesus achieved all that God sent Him to do; in that sense it is entirely right for the cross to be the symbol of Christian faith; it stands at the heart of Christian faith. This is a crossroads moment for Jesus and He turned His face towards Jerusalem and the cross.

This is a crossroads moment for His friends as well; they were less comfortable about the choices they were facing. *"If anyone..." (Mark 8:34)* We talk about having a cross to bear and we mean that we have a cantankerous husband, or a nagging wife, or wayward children who'll not do what they're told and no doubt these are hard things to bear, but that is not what Jesus means by taking up a cross. This is all about who directs my life; who is in charge of my life? We live in a culture where there is really only one answer to that question for lots of people – "me". "I'm in charge; I'm master of my own universe; I will do what suits me and nobody can tell me otherwise; I will set my family life in a way that pleases me and if you don't like that, then tough!" Ego rules!

Almost every bad news story represents a crossroads moment when someone makes a choice, and I know these are extreme examples: the choice to buy a gun and kill seventeen pupils in a school in Florida; to take corrupt payments when you're president of a country or the CEO of a multi-national business; to abuse your position as an aid worker or politician to take advantage of the people your supposed to be caring for, to harass people, to exploit people. All of these are choices shaped by ego! They damage the world! The Church is not free from these bad news stories! But Jesus has gone the way of the cross, a servant, humble, suffering to save the world; Jesus has challenged His disciples in every generation to make the same choice, the path of the cross.

Jesus is talking about us choosing to change, to take "me" from the throne, from the centre and making Jesus king, Lord, the centre of everything. He suggests that this choice adds value to our life, makes it even more special: *"Whoever..." (Mark 8:35)* This means asking a different set of questions, but questions that add a new kind of value to way we go about our everyday business: How can I be the kind of person Jesus wants me to be? How can I be the kind of husband or wife Jesus wants me to be? How can I be the kind of parent Jesus wants me to be? The kind of person at work? The kind of neighbour that Jesus wants me to be? That changes life; there is a death to die, to "Ego; me; self" and no longer put me at the centre of everything but to put Jesus at the centre of everything. This is a hard choice to make because almost our whole human instinct is about looking after "number one!" and that is me! This is a crossroads moment when we choose the path that says "follow Jesus and walk in His footsteps."

Why would we want to make that choice? It seems a choice that no-one would want to make; it is too hard and we're giving up too much. Yet for generations, people have chosen to follow in Jesus' footsteps; this is about being the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. Why have they made that choice? Because they have come to see that taking up the cross is the best choice we can make for life full of value! They have come to see that this is way by which we save our soul. There is a value to life that is about intangible things, not money, not possessions, but what kind of person am I inside?

Jesus walked the Via Dolorosa; He carried part of His cross on the way to Calvary; the story tells us that he stumbled a couple of times and needed help. He walked the way of the cross for the salvation of the world. He challenges us to walk the way of the cross, and this is not about walking the Via Dolorosa, though I suspect that would be a moving experience in itself. What kind of person will I be? Will I suit myself? Or will I be the kind of person Jesus wants? These are crossroads questions. Are these crossroads moments in our lives? Where have we come from? Where are we heading? *"Whoever..." (Mark 8:35f)*