

Scripture:

Mark 8:31-38

“The things of God and the things of men ----- following Jesus.”

And so our Lenten journey begins.

Lent ----- the 40 day journey leading up to Easter Day.

Lent ---- a yearly invitation to delve deep into the heart of Christianity.

Lent ---- an opportunity to cut to the core of our faith --- a microcosm of our faith.

Lent ---- sacrifice --- faithful obedience ---- death to worldly ways --- resurrection ----- God’s grace and the saving love of Jesus Christ ---- all tightly packed into 40 days.

Over the past few years I’ve had a number of people ask me things like ---- Why is lent forty days? ----- What is the significance of 40? ---- Where does lent come from? ----- Is there any mention of Lent in the Bible --- if not --- Why do we even have it? ----- if so --- Where can I find it?

So Lent ----- first of all there is no mention of Lent as we know it in the Bible ---- Lent as we know it is an invention of the Church.

For sure there was always a time of preparation for Easter right from the very birth of the church ---- but the time that we now refer to as Lent comes about early in the 3rd century --- likely in the year 313.

So why 40 days --- what’s the significance of 40?

Well ----- for forty days it rained on the ark -----
 ----- for forty days Moses fasted on Mount Sinai
 ----- for forty days the spies scouted out Canaan
 ----- for forty days Israel’s armies were taunted by Goliath
 ----- for forty days Elijah walked on the strength of the angel’s food to the mountain of God
 ----- for forty days Ezekiel lay on his right side
 ----- for forty days the inhabitants of Nineveh repented

----- for forty days Jesus wandered in the wilderness
 ----- for forty days Jesus walked the earth after His resurrection.

Forty is often the space between.
 In the Bible it often takes forty days to journey to God.
 Forty days seems to be the time it often takes for us to see what God is doing
 ----- to realize what He has in store.

Essentially God gives us forty days ----- the way He did Noah ---- and
 Moses --- Elijah ----- and Ezekiel ----- the people of Nineveh ---- and Christ
 Himself ----- to wrap our heads around just what He is about to do.

Forty days to wrap our heads around God's will in its purest form -----
 Christ ----- Christ crucified ----- and Christ resurrected.

So the 40 days of Lent are made available to us to come to the realization ---
 ---- and come to terms with the fact that God is forever making things new --
 ----- resurrection
 --- new and eternal life ---- Easter life.

Forty because that's how long it takes for us to shift away from the things of
 men ---- and come to grasp with --- and focus in on ---- the things of God.

And so our Lenten journey begins.

And it begins for us today in Mark chapter 8.

In Mark's gospel today Jesus rebukes Peter saying in verse 33 ----- "Get
 behind me satan. ---- You do not have in mind the things of God --- but the
 things of men."

Now ---- before we mistakenly think that there is some kind of a permanent
 separation between the things of God and the things of man we need to
 pause.

It's not as though these are two mutually exclusive things.

With God over here --- and man --- humanity --- over here.

Rather it's a matter of priorities.

If we put human needs first ----- then we will never get to God.

So great are the needs of men that they can consume us.

Look around at the world today ---- there are enough good and faithful causes to consume all of our energy and our very last dollar --- hunger --- human trafficking ---- lack of water --- lack of housing --- lack of education --- lack of health care ----- and on and on the list goes --- too many good and faithful --- necessary causes to ever list them all off.

But ----- God must come first.

Because of course when we do put God first --- we soon come to realize that this also always leads to a deep concern for human needs as well --- the things of man.

But it must be God first --- and then people.

Remember --- when asked what is the greatest commandment Jesus replied - ----- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart ---- with all your soul ---- and with all your mind.” ---- and then ----- and only then ----- “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

In other words --- God first --- and then humanity ---- God first and then your neighbour.

Love of God and concern for God will always ultimately lead to a concern for our neighbours as well.

However a concern and focus that begins with others first and not God --- will not necessarily lead us to God.

And clearly Peter failed to grasp this in Mark’s gospel reading today.

Peter thinks of Jesus in human terms first ---- and therefore his understanding of Jesus is misguided.

Peter is unable to grasp the full nature of Jesus as Messiah.

He thinks of Jesus in purely human terms.

And we know this because when Jesus says ----- in the first few verses of Mark's gospel reading today ----- "... that he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed..." ----- Peter can't understand it.

Jesus ----- suffer ---- be rejected ----- killed?

Peter can't stand for this.

He only sees all of this from a strictly human point of view and doesn't understand that it is all part of God's will and Jesus' role as Saviour ---- Messiah.

And we know this because of what happens next.

Verse 32 ---- "He --- Jesus --- spoke plainly about this --- and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

Imagine ---- Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him.

It's one thing to deny Jesus ----- or doubt Jesus ----- or question Jesus.

But to rebuke ----- to sharply criticize and reprimand Jesus Christ ----- as Peter does in Mark's gospel today ----- is another matter all together.

Imagine Peter rebuking Jesus --- because that's precisely what happens in Mark's gospel today.

If we think about it it's not that surprising that Jesus responds in turn rebuking Peter saying sharply --- "Get behind me satan and you do not have your mind on the concerns of God but on human concerns."

If we want to follow Jesus we must first have our minds on God ----- "Loving the Lord our God with all our heart ---- with all our soul ---- and with all our mind."

And then we can move to human things ---- "Loving our neighbour as ourselves."

Order matters ---- priorities matter.

Loving God always includes loving others.

But God must be first.

We don't necessarily get to God through loving others --- we must always start with God first.

Following Jesus means single minded focus on God's will.

Following Jesus means denying what we want and seeking what God wants.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves.” ---- Jesus says in verse 34 from Mark's gospel today.

Following Christ calls for a complete reversal of how the world works.

Just as Jesus brings about a complete reversal ----- eternal life through brutal death ----- so we must enter in to this kind of reversal if we want to follow Him.

And clearly Peter doesn't get it ---- at least not on this day.

“You have your mind on human things and not divine things” --- Jesus says to Peter.

The subtext is ---and this isn't good Peter --- you have to change this.

You have to reverse this ---- putting God first and then others.

More often than not when we make mistakes in life --- when we sin ----- it is a matter of misguided priorities.

Misguided priorities like taking something that is secondary and treating it as though it were primary.

That's what precisely what Peter does.

He takes the secondary concern for others ----- which in itself is a pretty good thing ----- and places it as primary concern ----- above even a concern and love for God.

More often than not --- for most of us --- our sin ---- our shortcoming ---- our poor and less than faithful choices ---- aren't things that are outright evil --- and way off the graph of goodness --- murder --- rape ----- grand left and so on.

More often than not ---- for most of us ---- our sin --- is in making something that is secondary primary.

Just as Peter does in Mark's gospel today.

And we do well to remember that by this point Peter has committed Himself ----- and fully --- to Jesus.

He's hitched his cart --- his whole life --- to Jesus.

He knows that his life is intimately tied to Jesus' life.

Peter has pretty good and faithful focus and commitment.

Where he errs is that he then rolls out what this will look like in strictly human terms.

In other words ----- Peter figures that if Jesus is going to suffer and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and teachers of the law ---- and then killed ----- than anyone committed to Him --- as Peter is ---- must expect the same kind of treatment.

And Peter doesn't like this prospect one bit.

You see Peter has taken this secondary concern --- this human ----- worldly - ---- short term concern ---- rejection suffering ----- and made it a primary concern.

And that's where he errs.

And so Jesus calls Him on it ----- guiding him in a much more faithful and fruitful path.

Clearly Peter fails to see the much greater divine picture.

He fails to see the far more powerful divine nature of Jesus' Messiahship.

He can't seem to get past the human part --- the suffering --- rejection ----- killing ---- crucifixion part --- and see the salvation --- atonement ---- reconciliation ----- divine fulfillment part.

He takes what is secondary and makes it primary.

Following Jesus demands a complete re-ordering of our lives.

It demands of us that we lose our lives.

Give our lives away for the sake of the gospel.

“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it ----- but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” --- as verse 35 from Mark's gospel today says.

Losing --- giving away our life to God ----- allowing Him to use us for His purposes ----- is placing the things of God first.

Losing --- giving away our life to God ----- denying ourselves ----- allowing God to use us for His purposes ----- is re-ordering our lives contrary to how the world and everything we see and experience around us is ordered.

Losing --- giving away our life to God ----- denying ourselves ----- allowing God to use us for His purposes --- is all about ensuring that those second and third --- and fourth string concerns ----- stay where they are ----- and never creep their way up into mistakenly becoming primary concerns.

Peter isn't out to lunch ----- or lost.

He has already hitched his life to Jesus.

His mistake --- or sin --- is in failing to grasp the full nature of Jesus' Messiahship --- defining it in mere human terms --- worldly ways.

He puts far too much focus on the short term --- secondary stuff ----- the suffering and rejection and beating and killing --- such that it obscures what really matters ----- resurrection --- salvation --- atonement ----- reconciliation ----- life abundant and everlasting ----- and everything else that is the reality and beauty of Jesus Christ.

Following Christ means putting divine things first and human things second ----- and never ever letting these things reverse themselves in order and priority.

Most sin ---- most mistakes other than the truly grotesque and rare ----- are simply a matter of shifting priorities --- what ought to be secondary and thirdly and fourthly ----- subtly --- but insidiously ----- creeping it's way to becoming primary when it never should.

Peter is a pretty good and faithful guy --- he's a disciple of Christ ----- he's hitched his life to Christ and he's giving it his all.

But he slips up ---- and he slips us subtly ---- in little ways.

He doesn't put what is 28th or 104th first --- but what is secondary first.

More often than not that's how evil works subtly shifting priorities one at a time such that we barely even notice until it's almost too late.

Following Jesus means putting God first.

And any and everything else secondary.

Because that's precisely what Jesus did ---- God first.

This lent --- the next 40 or so days ----- our job is figure out best ---- how we can work at and ultimately succeed at making sure that no matter what life throws at us --- we can figure out a way to always put God first.

Easter is all about what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Lent is the period of time we are blessed with to wrap our heads around this.

Lent --- the journey to the greatness of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

God first ----- everything else secondary.

When we do this we're truly following Christ.

And when we do this --- all the rest falls into place.

Amen.