

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

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February 25, 2024

*Mark 8:31-38*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.<sup>1</sup> *Amen.*

After feeding the four thousand<sup>2</sup> and healing a blind man at Bethsaida,<sup>3</sup> Jesus and the disciples go ahead of the crowds to Caesarea Philippi.<sup>4</sup> On the way there, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” [They answer] him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’<sup>5</sup> Jesus then narrows his inquiry: “But who do *you* say that I am?”<sup>6</sup>

To this more personal question, Peter righteously declares, “You are the Messiah.”<sup>7</sup> *Then* Jesus opens today’s Gospel appointment with the announcement that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”<sup>8</sup>

Before continuing the action of the story, Mark offers the observation, “He said all this quite openly,” or, rendered from the Greek more exactly, “He was speaking *the word* openly” – the “word,” the *λόγος*.<sup>9</sup> While Matthew and Luke omit this comment from their subsequent, Synoptic narratives, the vocabulary, phrase, and sentiment tether to an earlier note in Mark’s Gospel: following Chapter 4’s parables of the sower,<sup>10</sup> the lamp under a bushel basket,<sup>11</sup> and the mustard seed,<sup>12</sup> the Evangelist offers the commentary, “With many such parables Jesus spoke the word” – again, the *logos* – “to [the crowds] as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”<sup>13</sup>

Returning to today’s appointment, Peter takes Jesus “aside” and “rebukes” him.<sup>14</sup> We can count Jesus among those who don’t dig getting rebuked, for, “turning and looking at the disciples,” Jesus snaps back: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”<sup>15</sup>

Surely, we can read Peter’s reaction as his getting swept up in the ministry successes of Jesus: having witnessed the welcome and the teaching and the healing, Peter – *Say it ain’t so!* – refuses this portent of Jesus’ death. And understandably, for the promise of the Gospel up to this moment makes Calvary and the cross difficult to see over the horizon of their shared hopefulness. Adding to the attraction of *this* reading, we can relate to it as a “human thing,” to our desire for faith in Jesus to keep us and those we love from harm, to immunize us from fear, to save us from the brokenness of our world. As it was for Peter, so it is for you and me: the difficulty of the Passion prediction is not only about Jesus’ death, but about our own.

Yet, the reaction of Peter that Jesus protests may be even baser, less lofty. Again, returning to the text, Peter's rebuke follows Mark's observation about Jesus sharing the word "openly." Recall that Chapter 4 comment about Jesus explaining everything "in private" to his disciples; perhaps Peter simply sets his mind upon the "human things" of selfishness, self-centeredness, and jealousy – he prefers his insider status, and he does not like that Jesus shares their intimate circle's secrets.

During baptisms, we anoint the foreheads of the newly baptized with oil, in an action known as "chrismation." During the chrismation, the baptizer proclaims, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."<sup>16</sup> This proclamation echoes the heavenly voice we heard last week during Jesus' baptism,<sup>17</sup> as well as the one from the Transfiguration cloud that we heard two Sundays back.<sup>18</sup> Both these voices declare Jesus as God's Beloved, and chrismation joins us in Christ's belovedness.

The baptismal anointing and that proclamation offer a foil to the experience we shared on Ash Wednesday, when, beginning Lent, we had ashes pressed into our foreheads – "imposed," in the language of the book – with that very different declaration, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Our "making a right beginning"<sup>19</sup> of this season recalled the third chapter of Genesis, when God chastises the serpent, and then the woman, and then the man, concluding, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."<sup>20</sup>

While baptism announces our eternal nature, our Ash Wednesday devotions announce our mortal nature – a liturgical rhythm mirroring Peter's own, halting, "Amen ... Lord, have mercy"<sup>21</sup> faithfulness ... and shortfall. Both these natures remain part of us and all the human experience – "always and everywhere,"<sup>22</sup> not one or the other, but *both* – yet we do not always know how to accept the enduring ambivalence of these marks.

Do you remember "The Rouge Test" from your freshman-year, introduction to Psychology? Measuring self-awareness in young children, during the simple experiment the scientist surreptitiously marks a child's face with a blot of rouge or lipstick – on their nose or on their forehead – and then sets the child in front of a mirror. Children younger than one year do not realize they see themselves reflected. These infants will begin cooing conversations, as though a new, especially engaging companion sits before them. Experiments show these children peeking behind the mirror, trying to catch this elusive new friend.

In a variation of The Rouge Test, the scientist employs a wall-length mirror, marks the child's face as before, and sets the child's mother beside them. In this scenario, the children study the reflections they see ... themselves and their mother ... and then they wipe *their mother's* forehead to try and remove the mark from their own face. Psychologists suggest this behavior indicates the child has not yet self-differentiated; the infant still understands her as an extension

of themselves, and not as a separate person. By eighteen months, most children will recognize their reflection, and they will try and remove their own mark.

*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Imagine, then, a spiritualized “Rouge Test:” We set a long mirror behind the altar rail, and, in it, we see all our companions in this household of God kneeling beside and behind, a great company of sullied faces and anointed brows. And then, among these many faithful, we see our own reflection – impressed, as it always is – with both oil and ash.

We paw at the marks like toddlers, scraping first at our own countenance: when we suffer the struggle of this passing world, we wipe away our chrism, failing to remember that we are loved, even across death; and, when we live with entitlement rather than gratitude, we deny our dust, foolishly refusing to recognize our interdependence and our mortality.

Seeing so much belovedness and brokenness in this spiritual mirror overwhelms us, and we – like Peter – begin to paw spitefully at those marks in others. Like infants who cannot self-differentiate, we attempt to make ourselves feel better by swiping at our neighbors:

Seeing those who have what we thought was ours alone, or those who have what we want but have not yet received, we rebuke the cosmos! “Did you hear they moved out of the city? Oh yeah: the yard, the dog, a suburb that starts with a ‘W’ – the whole thing.”

Grappling guilt and confusion for the graces we enjoy at a time when we know that others suffer, we reprimand the Lord! “How can they laugh so glibly about pickleball – *pickleball!* – when the whole world is on fire!”

Recognizing in others’ lives what we fear or dislike about ourselves, we lash out, exorcising our frustration about our own liabilities. “It must be nice to have high cheekbones, a full head of hair, and a mind like a trap: everything comes so easily for that guy.”

To all this base behavior, “Jesus [challenges] the crowd and the disciples”<sup>23</sup> – and us – saying, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”<sup>24</sup>

To be “marked as Christ’s own forever,” is to be unconditionally loved. With the anointing of chrism, we accept God’s claim on our lives, professing that we – *and all people* – are made holy, blessed, and beloved. To be marked as “dust,” is to be unavoidably finite. With the imposition

of ashes, we accept our mortality – our limitations and our imperfections – and we accept the same *of all people*. And to take up our cross is to live in the model Jesus' vulnerability, bearing our authentic ambivalences – our ash *and* our oil – alongside all those whom God has made *and who all bear the same*.

Trinity Church, we replace that spiritual mirror with a window – A doorway! A gate! – open to the whole world, where we and all people bring to this altar our avarice *and* our aspirations, our guilt *and* our gladness, our disdain *and* our delight. And with the humility of Jesus inspiring compassion, rather than judgement, together we will find salve for our wounds and a guard for our joy – in moments of light and life, as in seasons of worry and even war. We offer ourselves to this Beloved Community as imperfect and holy ... as mortal and eternal... as faithful companions in this household of God.

*Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From Psalm 31.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:1-21.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:22-26.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:27a.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:27b-28.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 8:29a.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 8:29b.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 8:31.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8:32a.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 4:1-9.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 4:21-25.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 4:30-32.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 4:33-34.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 8:32b.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 8:33.

<sup>16</sup> From “Holy Baptism” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 308.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 9:7.

<sup>19</sup> These several references are all from “Ash Wednesday” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 3:19.

<sup>21</sup> In this morning’s worship, from “The Decalogue” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 350.

<sup>22</sup> From “Eucharistic Prayer A” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 361, among several references.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 8:34a.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 8:34b.