



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 15th May 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Mark chapter 10:32-52

Tales of the Unexpected

Introduction – Solving the Riddle of Life

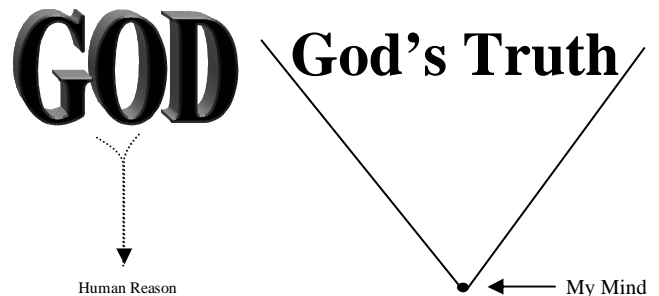
Our sermon title reminds us of a T.V. series which specialised in taking us by surprise at the end of each episode. Do you remember **Tales of the Unexpected**? Each story would end with a twist that we could never have predicted. It was a very popular series because many of us like to try to solve riddles. And so they often crop up in films or literature, like the Nicholas Cage film, **National Treasure**, or the novel, **The Da Vinci Code**, or far more memorably and helpfully, CS Lewis' Narnia Tale, **The Silver Chair**, (which is, in my estimation, along with **Pilgrim's Progress**, the finest work of fiction on the Christian life I have read). All of those have riddles the characters are trying to solve.

Now, I don't know if you find life puzzling, a bit of a riddle? Most of us would, I think, concede that there are issues that puzzle us.

Why is there pain and suffering in the world? Or how can I prove the existence of God? And along with such vast metaphysical puzzles there is the more humdrum confusion we experience in life from day-to-day as we struggle to decide our priorities: do you ever go to bed at night wondering whether you spent your time and energy during the day in the right way? Did I spend too long at my desk? At work? Did I give enough time to relationships? Should I have handled that conversation differently? Was I wise to spend that money?

We long for something that will clarify our priorities and make these issues simple, because they seem to tax our brains to the limit. Now, the human brain has been called 'the most complex phenomenon in the known universe'. Apparently, it has approximately the same volume as the engine of a Harley Davidson motorcycle, it weighs about 3½ lbs, and each one has a hundred billion nerve cells and a hundred trillion interconnections (which may make you look

at the head of the person in front of you with a new respect). But when it comes to understanding eternity, to grasping the meaning of life, to knowing God, then a couple of diagrams I have used before may help us.



As sophisticated as our brains are, for the creature to understand the Creator is a big ask. Is it any wonder that you and I are puzzled? That we find life puzzling or confusing? If there is a God behind this universe, it should be no surprise that we struggle to understand Him, to solve the riddle of His existence and nature.

Please look at our passage: ***They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid*** (v 32a): fear and astonishment, because these people were trying to understand God, as He walked on the earth in the person of His Son, Jesus. It has been going on all through Mark's account of Jesus' life. What you and I try to do, they were trying to do. And like us they found it a struggle. But as God dealt with them then, the disciples all through Mark's gospel, so He deals with us now.

There is much for us to learn from this passage about how God perseveres in bringing us to understand His kingdom; in particular there is a key that can unlock it for us, and it concerns Jesus'

death. Strangely, as we are going to see, a death is the key to the riddle of life. In these last couple of chapters of Mark's gospel, Jesus has begun to explain to His disciples about His death, but it is clear from their reaction each time that the disciples simply did not get the point. For them, at this stage, the prospect of His death was inconceivable.

1) The Inconceivable Prospect of His Death

(vv 32-34)

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise" (vv 32-34). This time He was more specific about His death than He had ever been before. Notice: the location—Jerusalem; the role of the disciples—betrayal; the agency of the Jewish religious authorities—the chief priests and teachers of the law; the involvement of the Roman civil authorities—the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. But the final outcome three days later—He will rise.

But neither the nature of His death, nor the fact of His resurrection, entered the thought-world of the disciples at this point. They simply did not grasp what He meant, as we will see from what followed. But we note the clarity with which Jesus spoke about the future and the patience with which He kept repeating Himself (8:31; 9:12,31).

But it fell on deaf ears.

2) The ill-informed ambition of His disciples

(vv 35-40)

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask" (v 35). James and John would have been aware they were part of an inner circle, along with Peter, because, it was just those three disciples who had been with Jesus at His transfiguration in 9:2-13.

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory" (vv 36-37). The tension was mounting. The disciples sensed that Jesus' ministry was coming to some climax. And James and John wanted to put down a marker for the future, to stake a claim in Jesus' glory. Perhaps they intended it to encourage Him: "We're with you all the way Jesus, and so we're claiming the reward for being your closest followers." Their faith and loyalty were not in question, but their understanding was way off.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (v 38). Jesus was referring to the cup of God's anger on human sin that He would drink on our behalf, and by "baptism" He meant, not what we think of by baptism, but the overwhelming deluge of suffering that He was to suffer. James and John's reply was either foolish bravado, or deep misunderstanding: *"We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with"* (v 39). James and John could not reconcile the human race to God by their sufferings and deaths, but they could still suffer and die, and in that sense they would copy Jesus. But they had not understood the nature of His kingdom: *"but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared"* (v 40). That was a God-matter, not a man-matter.

3) The Illogical Pattern of His Kingdom

(vv 41-45)

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John (v 41). The reaction of the ten said it all. This was no new dispute. The disciples had been arguing which of them was the greatest in the previous chapter (9:34). Now perhaps they sensed a denouement was near. Perhaps the glorious Kingdom was about to begin in Jerusalem; and the wretched James and John had tried to steal a march on the rest of them!

So Jesus did as He had done before: He called them together and tried to teach them the nature of the Kingdom: *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become*

great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all (vv 42-44). But what glory can there be in service and slavery? Notice how illogical all this is—Jesus does not say ambition is wrong. He is not, like Buddha, saying you should not want to be first. He does not forbid the human desire to excel. He redirects it. In fact, He reverses it. He turns it upside down. *Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all* (vv 43b-44).

Human beings are made to desire, to strive, to seek, to be ambitious. So, our peace does not lie in the obliteration of desire, and the denial of all ambition as Hinduism and Buddhism would teach us. No, we find our peace in locking our desire and ambition on to what God made them for—desiring Him, seeking to be like Him.

So, how can service and slavery be glorious? After all, aren't we so proud of ourselves for having banned slavery for its injustice and degradation? How can it be glorious? By the cross: *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (v 45). Previously Jesus had predicted and described His death. Now, for the first time, He explains it. It was to be exemplary, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”* and it was to be substitutionary, *“and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

He would die so many could live; dying their death for them. Without this explanation the cross could not make sense, because it would have been achieving nothing. But, with the explanation, the cross makes sense not only in itself, but also of the pattern of life set before us in verse 43-44: *“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”* Why? Because that is God's glory. That is the way His power is released on earth. That is the way human lives are changed.

Why do we struggle so much to grasp this? Even Jesus' words were powerless to get His disciples to understand; it would take the cross itself and the resurrection that followed to open their eyes finally to the truth. But then that truth gripped their lives, and they changed the world! Through the power of His Spirit as we remember at Pentecost. If God is like that, like verse 45, then we must be like verses 43 and 44: servants and

slaves, for it is in our service and our slavery that the power of God will be seen. Not in our success.

Do we want people to sense God's power where we live? Where we work? Then be a servant and a slave; which is not the same as being a doormat. Servants and slaves are not dumb. They speak. But they live for others.

So the cross is the key to understanding life—the way Jesus died and what His death achieved. We will not be able to reverse our thinking without the cross. Think of a car's ignition key: I can sit behind the steering wheel and turn it from side to side; I can change gear; I can depress the clutch; but, nothing will happen until I put the key in the ignition and turn it. So the cross is the key. And without it, life will always remain a riddle, a puzzle that blurs our priorities, and saps our energies. Is it so difficult to grasp this? Well, the last incident of the chapter provides an answer to that.

4) The Irresistible Simplicity of His grace

(vv 46-52)

Then they came to Jericho. *As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging* (v 46). Last week we saw the response of children contrasted with that of the Pharisees and a rich man in the first half of the chapter. Here we see the response of a blind beggar contrasted with that of the disciples. The Pharisees had begun their question, “Is it lawful...?”; and the rich man had begun his, “What must I do...?”. Notice how Bartimaeus spoke to Jesus: *When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see”* (vv 47-51). “Have mercy on me! Have mercy on me! I want to see!” And the first thing he will have seen would have been Jesus. It is what we all most need. To see our God. *“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the*

road (vv 51-52). “Have mercy on me... I want to see” and no more spiritual a prayer will ever pass your lips or mine.

Yes—there are mighty puzzling things about life on this planet. I am not in the least surprised at the struggle Jesus’ disciples had to understand what He was saying to them as they journeyed to Jerusalem. I would be surprised if a good few of us here—perhaps all of us in our honest moments—would not admit to being puzzled, to finding our lives a riddle because of conflicting priorities and unsolved problems. But the problem lies in our hearts as it lay in the disciples’ hearts. We think as the world thinks. We let it tell us what is valuable and who is great and how to be powerful. We allow the world to define success for us, and we believe what it tells us.

Bartimaeus was probably not the brightest man in Jericho that day. But he knew he needed Jesus.

Mark does not present him to us as a wise guru, but as a needy beggar, to whose desperate cry Jesus immediately responded. I wonder if Jesus felt a certain relief in dealing with Bartimaeus? Here was a man, who knew his need, and who knew Jesus could meet his need, and who longed to bring his need to Jesus, while those dear disciples continued to argue about how they could be greater than one another. I wonder how you and I look to Jesus? Jockeying for position, for human rewards, confused and muddled in our lives? or running to Him—**Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus** (v 50) and running with Him **Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road** (v 52b)?

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)