

Confessing Jesus as the Christ And the Messianic Secret

Mark 8:22-30; James 3:3-12

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“I have a secret. Do you want to hear it?” almost instinctively draws the listener closer to the speaker... lest someone overhears what they shouldn't have. What is it about a secret that draws the listener in? Is it curiosity? Certainly curiosity is a factor in drawing us in to learn what we do not or may not already know. But I submit to you that something else is at play and that something else probably has to do with power and ego. It gives the speaker and the listener power to know something that they rest do not. Suddenly, we become important in our eyes and in someone else's eyes or else the secret is not shared. And more than likely the secret does not remain a secret very long because everyone wants to feel important to someone else they would like to impress.

Believe it or not viral marketing is based upon this very premise. Make the product available to a cool person and then tell that cool person it is not available for the wider public but only a select few and before you know it the secret is out about hushpuppies being hip and now every one wants a pair.

Is this what Mark had in mind when he has Jesus tell everybody to keep a secret about his true identity? Could it be that Mark wants the reader of his gospel to shout the good news to everyone they meet... for the secret about Jesus being the long awaited Messiah to go viral? For people like us to text their friends, “Have you heard the latest news?” “What news?” “That Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's boy is the Messiah. Any day now the revolution begins.”

That Mark has revolution on his mind is no surprise for anyone who has ever read his Gospel. Of the four Gospels, only Mark has a Jesus that has no time for speeches as we see in Matthew, in Luke, and in the Gospel of John. In Mark, we learn that Jesus teaches as one having authority by exorcising the demon possessed or healing the sick not by giving a lecture to the masses about the kingdom of God. Instead of talking about the kingdom of God breaking in upon the powers-at-be, Mark's Jesus demonstrates this reality for all to see. Jesus can exorcise the demon possessed because he has already entered the domain of Satan and bound the Strong Man. Even wind and wave obey the words of Jesus because he is Lord of creation and the forces of chaos have no choice but to fall in line and calm comes over the Sea of Galilee.

Though Mark would love to incite a revolution in his readers, the historical Jesus was less enthusiastic and more cautious about doing anything that would get him arrested prematurely. I say this because there is no evidence in any of the Gospels that the historical Jesus took on the power of Rome directly. Even in the region of Galilee, a hot bed of resistance against foreign domination, Jesus goes only to the back water towns of Capernaum and Magdala and Nazareth, by passing the bigger cities of Tiberius, Sepphoris, and the other eight cities that made up the Decapolis. If one wanted to start a revolution against the powers-at-be, then Caesar and Caesar's men are your target. And yet even before Pontius Pilate Jesus is evasive, never answering the question directly, “Are you the Christ, the King of the Jews?” Jesus' answer to Pilate was, “If you say so.”

What is a serious student of the Gospels to make of this? Only this... that the kind of revolution that Jesus has in mind is not one that comes about through the power of the sword but through the transformation of the human heart. Jesus wants nothing to do with the expectation that as the long awaited Messiah that the first order of business is to kick out the foreign occupiers. Jesus is not a Military Messiah, Mujahadin if you will, no matter how hard his followers and backers try to push him into this role.

This explains Jesus' rebuke of Peter. No sooner had Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one hand picked by God to restore the fortunes of Israel that Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must be rejected by the leaders and the people, suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. Peter being a good student of Messianic expectations takes Jesus aside and informs him that this is not in the script. The Messiah doesn't usher in the kingdom of God through his suffering and death but rather is the cause of the evil doers suffering and death. "Read the prophets!" Peter tells Jesus. To which Jesus says that I have and in Isaiah it says that the Suffering Servant redeems Israel through his suffering and death. This is the kind of Messiah I am. I am the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Now Peter get behind me where a true disciple belongs... for you have set your mind not on heavenly things but on earthly things.

And to prove this point Mark tells a story about a blind man coming to Jesus and requiring a second touch before he sees things as they really are. Could this be Mark's subtle way of suggesting that we are blind to what the confession "Jesus is the Christ" means until we have had a second touch from above? Does Mark really think that many so called Christians are walking around half blind as to the real meaning of Peter's confession? The answer I believe from my studies is "Yes." Unless one receives a second touch from above to see through the fog of self interest, Jesus will always be whomever we want him to be... a blank canvas... if you will... of what it means to confess Jesus as the Christ. Fortunately for us this is where the Holy Spirit comes into play. Unless the believer is receptive and welcomes the role of the Spirit to guide us to all truth about Jesus, Jesus will never live up to our expectations of him.

Sooner or later we will be disappointed as Peter was that day. And we might even have the temerity to take Jesus out by the woodshed and give him a stern talking to... to get with the program of blessing me and my family and my country... to expand my territory as the Prayer of Jabez teaches... because what good is a Messiah that suffers on behalf of humanity and asks his followers to do so as well.

Not many believers are willing to pay this price... and yet Jesus doesn't back away from issuing the second call of discipleship when he says, "If any be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

There you have it. Confession and Discipleship go hand in hand in the Gospel of Mark. The secret is out. You can not have one without the other. To do so is a distortion of the Gospel-- which we see in a movement called Prosperity Preaching. Preachers like Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, and even Robert Schuler are a few of the popularized versions we see on television. But what all these ministries have in common is that there is no room for the Cross in their theology and ministry. And yet without the cross there is no Christianity, no forgiveness of sin, no salvation to speak of... and certainly no transformation of the human heart that sees the world from a new perspective.

Oddly enough this is what repentance is all about. The Greek word *metanoia* literally means to change one's mind about things. When Mark introduces Jesus of

Nazareth to the reader of his gospel, Jesus takes up the message of John the Baptist. He proclaims loudly that the kingdom of God is near; therefore the time has come to repent (metanoia) if you will how you see things and act accordingly. God really is in charge and the time has come to align yourself and your lifestyle to God's rule rather than Caesar's rule.

And so it is fitting that the backdrop of Peter's answer to the question, "Who do people say that I am?" is Caesarea Philippi, a Roman province with statues of the gods all over the place, not to mention the image of Caesar plastered everywhere as well... on coinage... on statues... on buildings... and most annoyingly on the lips of those who say, "Hail Caesar!" when greeting a Roman official.

And so in the midst of the powers Jesus asks his disciples a decisive question, "Have they seen through the fog of who really is in charge to acknowledge the true Lord of all in their midst?" And the answer is not that Jesus is just another prophet in the long lines of prophets calling the king and the people back to God. And Jesus is not "The prophet" like Elijah who was to have a pivotal role in preparing the way of the coming Messiah. That role my friend fell to John the Baptist. No, what you have in Jesus is the Lord of all, the Son of the living God, who is the Anointed One of God, called to usher in the reign of God through his life, death, and resurrection.

Thus, it is not surprising that Peter fails the midterm exam not to see what his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Lord's Anointed, meant for the world and the people of faith. Some 2000 years later we are still struggling to grasp the reign of God that is manifested through weakness and not strength. Why would God so identify with human frailty, with the poor and down trodden of this world to die a humiliating death? An Early Church Father once said, "That which [God] has not assumed he has not healed." The writer of Hebrews said something similar by reminding the people of faith that, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us, but one who was tempted in every way as we are, but did not sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with confidence that we might receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need." Sooner or later all of us are going to be in position of total helplessness and not know who we can turn to for help. We would like to know that the one we turn to have the compassion and the power to save. The manner in which Jesus lived, died, and was raised, who can doubt his compassion and power to save?

This, my friend, is how the reign of God manifests itself through human weakness in order to save those in need of help. It is out of the broken places that ministry takes place to transform the human heart and in so doing the tragedy of sin and death is overcome by grace and grit.

This was true for the life of Senator Edward Kennedy who lived to see three of his older brothers die a tragic premature death. Joe, the eldest died in World War II. Jack died at the hands of an assassin's bullet on a grassy knoll in Dallas. Bobby, several years later, died from a different assassin's bullet in the kitchen of a famous hotel. Too much was expected of the last Kennedy boy to realize the dreams of Camelot... he took to drinking too much and left the scene of an accident... in which his actions directly caused the death of another. A failed and bitter divorce would follow, a son whose leg had to be amputated because of cancer... would embitter anyone but not Teddy. Teddy married again and found great solace in his Catholic faith to be that person Hemingway described as, "Everyone is broken by life, but afterwards, some are stronger in the broken places."

It is one thing to overcome tragedy with grace and grit because it is thrust upon you. It is all together a different thing to volunteer to engage the broken places on behalf of Jesus Christ that life might be redeemed. To do so is to answer the call to discipleship. To do is to know what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To do so is to daily deny the impulse to save one's self and think of saving another by following Jesus where death is a daily reality but so is everlasting life for those who have the eyes to see... the present and future reign of God. Now that the secret is out about confessing and following a Messiah who redeems the world through his suffering and death, will you answer the call to be his disciple? I hope so, I pray so. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.