

Jonathan Aitken Sermon for 16 September
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

SUNDAY, 16 September

ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

Mark 8:27-end

James 3:1-12

Isaiah 50.4-9a

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Our Gospel reading today starts with a real 'Wow' moment.

It was a game changer, and a turning point in the story of Jesus's ministry.

Such moments occasionally happen in secular history too.

For example, when Winston Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, within days, the mood of Parliament and the country changed from appeasement and defeatism

to courage and defiance.

That was a political 'Wow' moment.

On a lighter note if one was looking for a theatrical Wow moment my pick would be the scene in *My Fair Lady* when Professor Higgins is running out of patience with his failed elocution lessons and suddenly Eliza Doolittle says with perfect ladylike enunciation:

The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.

Professor Higgins as played by Rex Harrison, was completely wowed:

"I think she's got it! By George she's got it!" he cries. And from then on everything in the play changed.

As a humorous aside – last night- I tried out the sermon on my beloved wife Elizabeth who made the comment "This must be the first time ever that Rex has been quoted in a church sermon!"

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On a far deeper spiritual level everything changed in the sequence of events that followed this turning point in Mark's gospel which begins with Jesus asking his disciples the question: "Who do you say that I am?"

After what was perhaps an uneasy silence, suddenly Peter, impulsive, intuitive Peter breaks the silence with the extraordinary reply:

"You are the Messiah!"

In the slightly longer version of this episode recorded in St Matthew's gospel Peter's reply was,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God".

Now by George, if Peter had got it – and Jesus effectively acknowledged that he had, this was indeed a Wow moment.

Because the Jews had for centuries been awaiting the arrival of God's anointed Messiah who would be the Saviour of Israel and of the world.

And now here he was, standing with his disciples in a village of Caesarea Philippi.

But Jesus's tacit admission of his Messiahship was promptly followed by another extraordinary twist in the story when he sternly ordered his disciples not to tell anyone about it.

Why on earth should he have given such an order?

Surely confirmation that the Messiah had arrived should have been followed with celebrations and rejoicings.

But Jesus asked his disciples to keep quiet because he first had to teach them what the Messiah was going to do.

The problem here was that the Jews believed that the Messiah would be a great nationalistic conqueror, taking revenge on Israel's enemies, settling old scores, throwing out the occupying Roman Empire and ruthlessly wielding his divine power.

But this was a misconception. Jesus the true Messiah was going to be God's suffering servant, just as Isaiah had prophesied.

As he told his disciples he was going to suffer greatly, be rejected by the elders and the Chief Priests and be killed.

Peter it seems was appalled by this scenario. Like most Jewish people of that time he thought that the Messiah would be a military superstar who could not get rejected by the people and executed by the authorities.

So in his impulsive way he started arguing with Jesus, probably urging his Lord to exercise his power rather in the same way that Satan had done during the temptation in the wilderness.

For Jesus scolded Peter very sharply telling him, "Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things".

Then to reinforce his point that God's ways and human ways are different, Jesus called the crowd around him to emphasise that his followers should not look for liberation by a conquering Messiah.

Instead God's salvation would be delivered by death and resurrection, not by armies and military victories.

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The way of the cross, not the ways of the world, were the paths to which he was calling his followers.

Now, at first hearing, this must have sounded a gloomy message, dashing many human hopes and high expectations.

Yet Jesus's brutally honest command: "Let them deny themselves" are the keynote of his message.

For if we take these words simply and literally what they mean is that we as followers of Jesus must learn to say no to ourselves and yes to Him.

This is difficult.

We must say no to our own natural love of ease and comfort. We must say no to every course of action based on self seeking self promotion and self will.

Instead we must say yes to the hard teachings and commands of Jesus Christ.

When preaching here last month I tried to illuminate the magnitude of this challenge illustrated in a different form in John's gospel by quoting from the best selling Christian book of all time after The Bible. "The Initiation of Christ" by Thomas à Kempis. The quotation, well worth repeating, was:

"Many follow Jesus to the Breaking of the Bread, but few to the drinking of the Cup of His Passion".

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Or as Evelyn Underhill put it rather more colloquially in one of her Pleshey retreat lectures:

"Lots of people prefer the chocolate creams of religion to the dry bread and gruel of self denial".

Now there is a real tension here. Many of us rather prefer chocolate creams to bread and water.

If we take some of our spiritual nourishment from the chocolate cream shops are we only half Christians, in a state of half grace as meaningless as being half pregnant?

The answer from Mark is unequivocal. For Jesus is saying in this gripping challenge that he wants all of us:

In the more vivid if old fashioned language of the KJV he asks the rhetorical question:

"What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Is this a stark either or choice?

Perhaps we have to get well down the road of our personal spiritual journeys to understand that there is no point in gaining the world's glittering prizes if you lose the precious inner freedom of loving and being loved by God.

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He offers us that peace which the world cannot give. He teaches us that his service is perfect freedom. Or as Augustine said in his Confessions:

"Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee"

Listening to such concepts described in a sermon is a poor substitute for daring to live a life which is obedient to the call to humility of our Lord's words at Caesarea Philippi:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me".

Amen