

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 25th February 2018**

*Mark 8: 31 - 38*

What's your price? How much for your soul? Would you sell it for the whole world? 'What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?'<sup>1</sup> asked Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning. Famously, it was Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play Doctor Faustus who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years on earth with unlimited power. The end of that story revealed that Faustus was swindled. When the devils come to drag him to hell he is desperate for mercy and the opportunity to repent. You sell your soul cheaply if you exchange it to be omnipotent, all powerful, for 24 years.

If Doctor Faustus hasn't the wit to cut a good deal, the characters in the Gospels are awful at it. Peter, Jesus' most prominent disciple in the Gospel of Mark, is better than most. He learned that Jesus was the Messiah, but when he learned that the Messiah was to suffer, be rejected, and be put to death Peter would have none of that. Despite hearing too about the resurrection, nevertheless he wasn't going to follow the Messiah, the divine presence on earth, if suffering was going to be the road on which they would travel.

Not unlike Doctor Faustus, Peter wanted access to unlimited power, and the opportunity to save the world by exercising that power. He was not alone, we hear in chapter ten of the Gospel that James and John also wanted a payment in power as a reward for following Jesus, 'Grant us the right to sit in state with you, one at your right and the other at your left,'<sup>2</sup> they asked.

Famously, Judas, for reasons best known to him, also sold his soul for a very small profit. Out with the 12 disciples there are others - is a rich man tries to cut a deal. 'What must I do to win eternal life?' he asks. The reply, '...sell everything you have, and give to the poor,'<sup>3</sup> proves too high a price for this man of wealth.

Everyone has a price that either they are not prepared to pay to follow Jesus, or that they are prepared to accept to betray him. Being human, as we are, I'm sure we all do as well. We are tempted all the time to accept the price to turn aside from this journey with Jesus and to take a wider and easier road, one that is more comfortable for us even if others aren't as comfortable as we are; a more peaceful road even while many in the world don't live peacefully; a road paved with self-righteousness even while many around us are oppressed; a road upon which we are committed to lawful punishment even if the consequences of such justice are irreversibly harmful.

There is a tempting, attractive way of life on offer, which is comfortable and safe for us, but that leaves others having to look out for themselves. But, to take that comfortable road we need to have access to the power to protect it and to

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8: 36

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10: 10:37

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10: 17 - 22

maintain it. The road, which tempted Peter, James and John, Judas, the rich man is a road paved with power.

Peter's world, the world of 16th century England when Christopher Marlowe wrote Doctor Faustus, and our world today are filled with the belief that the key to happiness and prosperity, to justice and peace, to stability and freedom is power. Politically, for example, we are fixated with power. We see politicians and we assess them on how they use or abuse their power. We see power abused by others in every part of our society from the entertainment industry through business to the charity sector, and we wish that power would be used more responsibly.

Domestically, we believe that if only we had more power over our lives, more control, we would be happier and more content. At work, we equate leadership with power and look to the person in charge, the boss, to exercise their power in a way that inspires or challenges us.

Power over others: the lack of it; the pursuit of it; the exercise of it, dominates our lives and the structures of our society. We believe that it is the responsible and legal use of power that enables our society to flourish, and when society is diminished it is because power has been abused or used illegally. The President of the United States, we believe is the most powerful man on earth, so we are fixated on what he says and does or what he doesn't say or doesn't do.

So fixated are we on understanding our world in this way that we even project this power dynamic beyond the human and on to God. That's what Peter did when he discovered the Messiah. Like Peter, we believe that God is all-powerful. Anyone studying theology at university soon learns the Latin word *omnipotent*, all-powerful. This aspect of the divine appears not infrequently in our hymnbooks, and we teach it to our children; our God is a great, big God who can do anything because he is so powerful.

We are fixated on the power of God. So, like Peter we believe that when God is present on earth, in Jesus, when God is present in our lives through his Holy Spirit, when God acts in the world, then God should be able to do anything: wipe away every tear; lay low the kingdoms of the earth; raise up the broken-hearted, and overturn the economic and social structures of an unjust society.

But, if power and its use is how we understand the world around us and God's presence in this world then whenever we read Jesus' words, which we read this morning, and that he will repeat in the Gospel of Mark another two times, not to mention carry them out, then we should be as shocked, as angry, as fearful that we are being misled as Peter was when he first heard them from Jesus' mouth.

*'...he began to teach them that the Son of Man had to undergo great sufferings, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and doctors of the law; to be put to death, and to rise again...'<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 8: 31

When we hear these words we should be as ready as Peter to rebuke the omnipotent Messiah for this mad proposal that he give himself up to suffer, to be rejected and crucified. We should insist, as Peter did, that all of that be avoided, and that Jesus jump straight to a demonstration of great power of the kind he proposes with the resurrection.

But, if we do that then we have missed the point, we will have betrayed Jesus - as Peter would later do. For God in Jesus Christ is not building a kingdom where people exercise power over others, he is building a kingdom based on relationships where people learn to love each other. That is why God said at Jesus' baptism that Jesus was his Son. That is why he will say it again at Jesus' transfiguration. That is why Jesus calls disciples to follow him rather than sweeping in with an angelic army. That is why Mark, in this Gospel, says very little about what Jesus taught, and why Jesus uses miracles as metaphors rather than as acts of wonder.

In this Gospel God is not exercising power through Jesus, he is building a relationship with Jesus. And through Jesus God is building a relationship with us. When we read the Gospel of Mark we are not meant to be blown away by the power of the teaching or the wonder of the miracles, we are meant to discover a relationship with the person of Jesus. We are meant to come away from reading the Gospel and find ourselves less interested in how we lord it over others, and more interested in how we build relationships with all sorts of people in the world around us.

If you want to build a relationship with someone, you have to give up power over them. You can't build up your power over people and expect to build a relationship with those people. If you do that you will dominate that relationship and suck the life out of the other person.

If you want to have a relationship with your children, for example, you have to give up some of your power over them at some point. Successful Marriages aren't built on one person exercising power over another, but two people making themselves vulnerable to each other. If you want a relationship with the people that work for you, you can't be a dictator. If as a country we want to have a relationship with other countries, we have to give up some of our own sovereignty.

For God, in Jesus, the Kingdom is not about who has the most power, it is about who can build the best relationships. And, of course, as soon as you do that; as soon as you give up power; as soon as you start to build a relationship; as soon as you start to love, you become vulnerable. The more power you give up, the more you build a relationship, the more vulnerable you become. And, the more vulnerable you become the more likely you are to suffer for your love, for your relationships with others.

On the cross, God in Jesus has given away all power, has become completely vulnerable because he has sought to build his kingdom not on building up power but on building up relationships. On the cross, our God isn't an all-powerful God he is an all-suffering God.

In the Gospels, as in life, everyone has their price that they will accept to betray their relationships for power, except Jesus. On the cross he will be reviled by his enemies for his obedient commitment to save others, but not his own life. He does not accept the deal, and he does not exercise the power he has to come down from that cross, because he knows that as soon as he does that the relationship is broken and power is in play once again.

When Jesus says that we must take up our crosses in order to follow him, he is saying that if we want to be builders of this Kingdom, then we too have to learn how to give power away in order to build loving relationships with others even at the cost of our own vulnerability and potential suffering.

During Lent many people give something up as a discipline. The idea is that you give something up that has power over you in order to refocus your spirit and renew your relationship with God. It shouldn't be an easy thing to do, it should be hard, and you should suffer - a little at least. But, in that act of renunciation, you are symbolically playing out the whole act of salvation.