

Mark's Gospel begins, much like the others, with Jesus' simple and direct, "Follow me!"

Something about Jesus leads him to ask ordinary people like you and me to follow him. But you might expect some to ask him, "Well, who are you and where are you going?"

Yet these people don't; they just follow. And as they follow, Jesus gradually shows them who he is and where he's headed. So far, he's been feeding, healing, and preaching but hasn't said much about himself. But now, midway in Mark's Gospel, he really says who he is and where he's going.

Earlier he's shown them many things. Now he explicitly teaches them. Parts of his work may be self-evident, obvious. But now he teaches them, teaches them things they can't know unless he tells them.

Mark mentions him teaching before but gives us little of its content. Now it's different. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answer, "John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets." Then he asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter answers, "You are the Messiah!

No human had ever said anything so positive, so affirming, so absolutely true about Jesus. "You are the Messiah!" Other gospels add, "Son of the living God." Wow, Peter, great insight, good job!

But, ironically, though Peter gets it right in professing Jesus as the Messiah misunderstands, stubbornly resists the truth Jesus shares about the meaning of his being the Messiah. This happens as soon as Jesus began to teach them "that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes and be killed."

This sequence of verbs outlines the themes of what's ahead for Jesus, the divine necessity he accepts. He must suffer, be rejected, die, and be raised in obedience to God, not in accord with the expectations of either the Jewish leaders or the inner circle of his followers.

But Peter, who gave the technically true answer, won't have it. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." Think about that! A disciple never upstages, let alone admonishes his Master. This shows the contradictory meanings of "Messiah" for pupil and teacher. It's not just that Peter loved Jesus and couldn't bear him having to suffer and die. For Peter, the Messiah is an agent of divine power, come to run out the Romans, put Peter and his buds in power, and fix all that's wrong with the world. Such power should exempt Jesus and his followers from suffering, not lead to it. His idea of divine power stood in opposition to Jesus' connecting it to suffering and death.

Peter gets nowhere. He's reprimanded for his insolence. Disciples neither protect nor possess Jesus; they follow him. Jesus reestablishes the proper teacher – student relationship, and is none too gentle about it. "Get behind me, he says." And then he refers to Peter as "Satan." The thought that the Messiah can and should avoid suffering, rejection, and death, is a temptation he knows all too well; he knows where it comes from – the devil. He knows what would happen if he gives in to it, the failure of his saving work, the death of God's kingdom, the end of hope for our salvation.

What's at issue here is who's in charge. To say, "Messiah," or "Christ" to someone is to give up the right to define what "Messiah" or "Christ" mean. It's to acknowledge the other's authority to define the term. Peter was behaving like a patron, not a disciple.

How often that's true of us: we come to Jesus as patrons, not disciples! We hear his teaching about

what it means that he's the Messiah, and don't like it, and try to make it something else, something loftier and nobler for him, something gentler, less confrontational, easier and more beneficial for us.

So, to use today's language, "who owns Jesus?" Jesus makes it clear that neither the Jewish leaders nor the disciples do. God does! Only God can define the meaning of Messiah. And Jesus says that the Messiah's willingness to accept suffering and death are at the heart of God's saving work.

So Jesus surprises his disciples by telling them that he's going to the cross. "God forbid!" says their leader Peter. It's impossible that the "Son of God" should have to suffer and die.

But the surprises keep coming. The teaching gets more difficult because it's directed at us. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Those who would be his disciple must bear a cross too, precisely because they're his followers. And, remember, the "cross" isn't something you bear simply because you're human – a health problem, a job loss, an annoying relative or boss. The cross Jesus is talking about is what comes from following him. The cross is the result of ending all efforts to get in front of Jesus and tell him what he ought to be and do, and getting behind him, following him, wherever he leads. That's what it means to follow him.

No wonder he has to teach us this, we'd never come it to on our own.

Here is a teaching – the Son of God is also the Suffering One, *and* those who follow Him must also suffer, be crucified, and die – a teaching we must be taught. The Son of God is also the suffering One, and we who follow him must also suffer, because the power of evil resists the goodness of God. Because the power of evil, expressed in sin and death, holds the world in its grip, a grip that won't be broken without a painful, costly struggle. A struggle, not in the ordinary terms of physical strength and power, but a struggle in terms of spiritual strength and power. And Jesus knows that the greatest power lies in humble, self-giving love, service, and sacrifice. We gather in Lent, to be reminded of this great truth, one we instinctively avoid, something we'd never know if Jesus hadn't taught us.

We who follow Jesus must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow, lose our lives in his life. Jesus says not only that he's destined for a cross, but we are, too! He not only predicts his suffering, but also says that suffering's in store for us, too. We, too, are to be bearers of the cross.

Now, all this talk about self-denial and cross-bearing may seem strident, demanding. Jesus is laying on difficult teaching; it goes against what we expect of "religion." You can't walk with Jesus unless you are willing to take up your cross and walk the way he's walking. That may seem like bad news.

Yet, maybe it's really good news. Jesus talks of self-denial, death, suffering, of not being ashamed to walk his way, and he speaks it to this rag-tag bunch of very ordinary, often dense disciples. Us!

After what he said, we might expect to read, "After this teaching, most of his disciples left him, muttering, 'I had no idea he was going that way; I'm out of here.'"

But they didn't! They kept walking with Jesus, even though he's been clear about the hard way he's going. They kept trying even though their egos get in the way and they still want to think of him in terms of power and glory. They stay with Jesus, even though he's promised them a cross. It's amazing, when you consider how dumb and disappointing the disciples often are.

When you think about it, it can only mean one thing. They loved him! Though it was hard for them to let their personal notions of Messiah go, they couldn't leave him, because they loved him.

That tells us what it takes for people like this to walk a way like his. They've got to love Jesus. When they do, though they may be weak and lack understanding, they follow. That's what allows ordinary people to walk with him, to do the same things he does, to bear the same cross he bears.

So the good news in this challenging teaching is this: Jesus believes that you are able to bear the cross. If you love him, he knows you can.

Jesus says elsewhere, "You are the light of the world," that is, you are bearers of light. Today he teaches something even more challenging, "You are bearers of the cross."

So here we are, taught by Jesus. But as Jesus implies, the point of this faith is not simply to sit here and listen to his teaching, but to get out of here and to live it, to be cross bearers in the world.

So here we are, called by Jesus, called to pick up our cross and follow him. That's how the world will know we're following him – when they see the cross on our backs, just like the one on his back. We are cross bearers.

Who owns Jesus today? Who defines the meaning of Messiah for both church and culture? There are all kinds of answers being given. Whether we like it or not, we have to give our answer. Someone must speak for Jesus today, speak his truth, or the Gospel goes silent.

Our best hope of giving a true, faithful answer, begins in loving him, with a love that puts him first, above all else, and then, because of that love, steadfastly following him. If we love him and seek to follow him, he'll take us where he goes, into suffering, yes, to the cross yes, our own cross, but even more, into eternal life. And the world will hear and see, not just by our words but by our life, who the Messiah is, and what salvation is, now and for eternity. Do you love him that much?

Lord Jesus, you have come to us as our Savior, as our Messiah  
... and we responded to you with rejection, hostility, and a cross.

We still find it hard to believe that our Savior should suffer, be rejected, and die.

It's not what we expected.

Lord Jesus, on top of that, you came to us promising that we should also be crucified,  
...if we followed you, that we should also suffer, be rejected, and die.

It's not what we expected.

Lord Jesus, forgive our false expectations, and our arrogant assumptions,  
...that lead us to see you, the Christ, in terms of glory and power,  
...and reject your humble serving and suffering love.

Forgive our acting as patrons rather than disciples, as if we own you and could order you about,  
...making you want we want you to be,

...avoiding the suffering and serving of both your messiah-ship and our discipleship.

May your words to Peter, "Get behind me," remind us of where we need to be –  
...behind you, ever ready to follow.

May what you called him, "Satan," remind us of where any denial of your need and ours  
...to be willing to sacrifice, serve, and even suffer, comes from.

Lord Jesus, keep defeating our false expectations, keep luring us to walk down your narrow way,  
...keep calling us to follow you, despite the cost, keep believing in us,  
...as we keep trying to believe in you. Amen.

Lord Jesus, we are thankful you have found us worthy to follow you.

Though we want resist what you have taught about being your being the Messiah,

...both in terms of what it means for you and what it means for us,

...every bit as much as your first disciples, we, like they, love you.

We pray that, though we may stumble disappoint you, just as they did, that we, too,

...will be able to do what you most clearly call and need us to do follow you.

With that hope, we take up our cross, not without fear,

...but also with gratitude for your presence and your example.

We pray those who find joy in even the harshest circumstances,

...that we might learn from their example to carry our cross in the sight of the world

...while pointing away from ourselves to you,

As those who accept our place behind you and are seeking to take up our cross and follow you,  
...we pray for...