

A Verse for All Seasons: Mark 9:31

A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

All the divisions in the Bible into chapters and verses were done much later. The division into chapters was made perhaps in the Eighth Century A.D., and the division into verses was made in the Twelfth to Fourteenth Centuries.

These divisions are not inspired, but they are helpful. Sometimes these divisions are rather clever the way they are. For example, everybody knows John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." What about 3:16 in other New Testament books and letters? 2 Timothy 3:16 is also significant: "All scripture is inspired by God...", and Revelation 3:16: "So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." Of course, 3:16 in other letters and books isn't always a striking verse, but nevertheless, it is an exercise that can be interesting.

The text in Mark 9:31 is in a similar kind of situation. For example, Mark 9:31 is very similar to Mark 8:31. In both Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer many things, be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again. In 8:31 Peter grabs Jesus and rebukes him. He didn't want talk of suffering and death. And Jesus rebukes Peter, saying: 'Get behind me, Satan!'"

In Mark 9:31 Jesus again tells his disciples he must suffer, be killed, and then rise after three days. The text says the disciples "did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him." They were buffaloed. They didn't realize what was happening. Although you have to admit it was rather plain: He was going to be captured by the Jews. He was going to be killed and rise again.

As you can see, Mark 8:31 and 9:31 are parallel texts. In the next chapter, in 10:33 – easy to remember, 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33 – again there is this passage in which Jesus says he is going to be captured, killed, and rise again.

What happens afterward this time, the third time? Immediately James and John, the brothers, say to him: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. . . . Let us sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:35-37). In other words, they expected him to restore the kingdom of David, and they wanted to promote themselves.

Why are people unable to see the difference between those things which are really critical and decisive and those things which are trivial and not essential?

For example, in some churches less than a century ago, the men sat on one side of the aisle and the girls and women on the other. There was a time when no woman would dare come to church with her head uncovered, even the girls. And they always wore dresses or skirts, never pants.

In a previous time ministers never used humor in a sermon or told a joke. It was considered improper to laugh in church.

Also in that time congregations sang the major hymns, the chorales, including those in a minor key, because that's what you did. Now some congregations avoid hymns written in a minor key and mainly sing what are called "praise songs," or as someone has said 7/11 songs, seven words sung eleven times, sung to bouncy, upbeat tunes. They don't start by singing: "Lord, have mercy upon me," because they want to be always positive, upbeat.

The basic point is that there are those who say: "Many things are not basic and must change," over against those who say: "Wait a minute, there is that which is basic and should never change."

There is a lot of pressure in the modern world to forget about the past, be positive, always ready to change and move ahead into the future. There is a lot of pressure among Christians to be with the culture, to be upbeat and entertaining. Some people come to church to get a boost for their feelings. They don't want negative talk or a negative experience.

What do we say to that? Three things about experience:

First is something that happens in the New Testament. You recall how in Matthew and Mark it says just before the crucifixion Jesus prayed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It wasn't a positive experience. Or you may think of the eleven who were there. They had been with him for three years, and all kinds of things had happened. Miracles and teachings. And then he is killed. He was gone. That was a negative experience.

Second, look at the hymn, "In the Garden." The hymn is sometimes used in funerals and it's based on that scene in the Twentieth Chapter of John where Mary Magdalene meets the risen Lord and she says: "Rabboni!" which means: "My teacher." It's quite a scene. The hymn goes: "He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own." It goes on: "He takes my hand..." What's wrong with that? It's not what happens in the Twentieth Chapter of John. The risen Lord says: "Yes." And then he says: "Don't touch me." Or you could say: Don't handle me because I have to go to my father. And so there is a huge difference between the risen Lord and us, a huge difference between he who is now beyond death and we who remain, who, while in Him, are still caught in sin and death. The huge difference is there. He is not our buddy. He is our Lord.

Third, you really ought to be wearing crash helmets in church. Why? Dynamite! TNT! The Gospel is a massive explosion. The Lord God makes it happen. The Word of God comes and grabs us, and in spite of ourselves makes us his own. This is decisive.

This helps us to focus. It is curious that we have these three verses in three different chapters, and Peter says in 8:31, as we might say: "Lord, Lord! No, things have to be nice.

We have to be happy. Not a cross." Or as in the second time, in 9:31, when they didn't know what to say and were afraid to ask him. Or, the third time, in 10:33, when they start talking about who's first in the kingdom. Which one of us is going to sit at your right hand?

This is the key. Not only is it repeated this way, but it's the key to the whole Bible and to the whole universe. The Lord God himself came and died and rose again for you and me. And that explodes everything. That makes all the difference. Why? Because it gives us, as Paul says in Romans 8:21, "the glorious freedom of the children of God." What is that freedom? Four things:

The first is the freedom to know that the Word of God produces faith in me. It says in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." We don't have to ask ourselves: Did I hear right? Did I understand it right? Or did I feel it right? No, he's done it. And that's enough. That's freedom. It doesn't depend on me.

In the second place, we hold that because of this, there is one priesthood of all believers. We don't have to depend on the minister. We don't have to depend on any kind of religious expert to proclaim the Gospel. You and I and all of us are called upon to proclaim the Gospel – not our experience, not our theological understanding, but to proclaim each one of us to all: He died and rose for you and me.

In the third place, when it comes to questions of politics and ethics, that means the Bible does not give the church a particular expertise about politics or science or other worldly matters. Individuals who are in the church may have expertise, but the church doesn't, nor does it have expertise about ethics. But we are given the freedom to use our minds and our expertise to work on politics for our neighbor. When it comes to individual questions for you and me, Paul spells it out succinctly in Romans 13:8-10 when he writes: What does the law say? Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness. Verse 9 says all the commandments are summed up in: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And then verse 10: "Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." In the freedom of the Gospel we ask ourselves: What does harm? That's a completely different way of looking at things.

Finally, about other religions: We're not caught in the trap of saying, "The final measure of everything is tolerance." We do not make tolerance God. We are open and free so that we uphold civil rights for everyone, but we also know that it says in John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." We have the freedom to proclaim the Gospel and also know that the Lord will do all things well. He will bring in his kingdom. It will work.

Out of this center, Mark 9:31, we get beyond the trivialities and back to that which makes all the difference. The Lord is Lord, and he makes all things right. He has saved you and me. We are free in him. Thanks be to God. Amen