



Sunday September 9, 2018

Willam Wrede, in the late 19th century expatiated on the observation that Jesus, especially as depicted in the Gospel of Mark, frequently asked disciples, healing beneficiaries, even the demons he imprisoned in the swine, not to reveal that he was the Messiah. This is the famous 'Messianic secret' debated by scholars ever since.

Wrede's theory, which also argued that the parables were a kind of secret language, failed to take hold very deeply, and today most scholars will argue that there were times Jesus wasn't ready to be identified, mostly because he was being chased by soldiers of Herod Agrippa or some other persecutor. Secondly, his carefulness about being named Messiah comes from his realization that even his friends are unlikely to understand very fully what he means by the title of Messiah. Unwanted pressure builds upon him when, particularly, people think he is called by God to liberate Israel from the political oppression of Rome and Rome's Jewish representatives.

Mark is always very direct, sometimes even crudely so, which is why his descriptions of significant events in Jesus' life are often so dramatic and otherwise apparently authentic that they seem very believable. It is not only a literary style, but a literary indication that these events surely did happen and not too differently from the way Mark depicts them.

Gentile dogs were compared to the children of Israel in last week's incident. Remember, even the dogs are allowed the crumbs from the master's table. So are gentile women. Today's lesson is perhaps even more dramatic, and Jesus is not any sort of nice guy once again. Poor Peter. He's only trying to be helpful. But Jesus is having none of it. Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on divine things, but human ones. Peter gets the title right, but it's meaning escapes him.

For many, the Messiah is expected to organize Israel militarily, and lead the

nation to freedom and prosperity. Judas Iscariot, who complains about the cost of oil used to anoint Jesus, is also charged with disappointment that his rabbi fails to take hold as a military leader, although he certainly meets all the spiritual criteria of Messiah. The title of 'Christ' means 'anointed one' or Messiah. How does Jesus fulfill the expectation?

Or maybe I should say: How does Jesus create the expectation, because no one was looking for crucifixion to be part of the definition of greatness. Jesus' sacrifice makes his person and mission holy. And that's not the end of it, as he urges everyone, crowd as well as disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

The Messiah serves and suffers and dies for his followers. This is a hugely different idea of leadership from the ones we usually entertain. It's not about prosperity or power for one identity group or another. Should he have stuck with his Galilean base? No. No. This good news, this gospel, is holiness for all, which will find its triumph in the time after time when the Son of Man comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels.

I suppose the question for all of us hearing his ringing challenge is what it should mean for us personally. Take up your cross. And what might that be? Careful. There's the first Christian Martyr syndrome. "O poor me, look how I suffer" from my ungrateful children, spouse, employer. And watch out for temptation to be the greatest martyr. We see that so clearly with the terrorists who kill themselves as they destroy the innocent.

I'm not talking about self pity or a false heroism, but about embracing the challenges through which life offers everyone the chance to make a difference, even if there's real danger involved. What about soldiers who fight the good fight, and conscientious objectors, with all the calumny they have to put up with. What about people who stick up seriously for racial justice, in school, in the courts, in the workplace. What about, what about, what about making peace within family life. You can come up with a thousand examples of the cross that contributes to Jesus' victory, not only in Jesus, but in us.

Let's take it up.

Amen

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