

‘When the road gets rough’

Mark 6:1-29

7/03/04am

I wonder do you recognise either of the following two types of Christian faith?

- a) people who want their faith to be ‘high’ on emotional excitement, inspiring events and general ‘buzz’, but fairly low on too many demanding expectations or on-going commitments.

OR

- b) People who want their faith to be mainly about quiet inward certainties and strong hopes for their lives, but still not too much in terms of practical commitments or serious service.

As the ‘little boy racer’ adverts put it, ‘Recognise anyone?’ Maybe we even see a wee bit of ourselves in one, or even each, of these pictures.

The part of Mark’s gospel that we’ve come to today leaves us little room for thinking that either of those pictures is a realistic option for people who are serious about faith in Jesus and following of Jesus. From the 3 separate sections that we read from Mark 6:1-29, Mark makes it very hard for us not to see that following Jesus will often make life harder rather than easier, that it will bring just as many demands as it does comforts, and that sometimes faith commitment will come at a pretty definite cost. Although this might not be what we like to hear, if we are serious about faith in Jesus, we need to listen to this message, to which we have given this title for today: *‘When the road gets rough’* (1)

Just to make sure that we don’t try to tell ourselves that today’s section is a bit of a one-off exaggeration, let’s remind ourselves of some other times when Jesus made the very same sort of point.

(2) Luke 9:57-58 & 62

A man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go”.

Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” ...No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

In other words, if it was difficult for Jesus, those who follow Jesus must ‘hang in there’ when they also find it difficult.

(3) Luke 9:23

If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

So today’s theme from Mark 6 is not an isolated one – it is a regularly recurring emphasis in the ministry of Jesus and in the message of the Gospel. We should not try to think about faith in Jesus without thinking about the fact that following Jesus can make life hard at times and will bring difficult demands and costly commitments – and there may be times ‘*when the road gets rough*’.

I have 3 ‘hard’ headings for us to think about this morning from Mark 6: (4)

1. It was **hard** because it was **home**.
2. It was **hard** because it **is** hard.
3. It was **hard** because it cost him **his head**.

1. It was hard because it was home. (vs.1-6) (5)

These verses tell us that when Jesus came to his home town of Nazareth he received as poor a welcome as anywhere he went. Even though the synagogue he taught in was probably the one in which he had been brought up, and many people went along to hear him, the general reaction was for people to say, *Who does he think he is? Sure he’s only a carpenter. We know his whole family and background.*

They were surprised by Jesus’ teaching, probably impressed even if they didn’t say so, but as it says, *They took offence at him.*

They couldn't get beyond the fact that they knew his background, that they knew his family connection, and that they had actually known him as he grew up among them.

They were neither willing nor ready to take Jesus or what he taught seriously.

It was hard because it was home!

As Jesus said, (6) *Only in his home town, among his relatives and his own house is a prophet without honour.* (vs.4)

For us, home can be one of the hardest places for Christian Faith. For a start, the people at home know us pretty well – warts and all - they know what our lives have been like in the past, and they can't miss our faults and failings at the moment. This wouldn't have applied to Jesus, but it certainly applies to us. Sometimes it is at home that the down side of our personalities is most obvious. We're not 'on our best behaviour' at home – and yet maybe this is going to be one of the most important places where the reality of our faith as Christians should show up – that's why following Jesus is going to be hard sometimes – harder at home, perhaps, than at church.

And harder at home, perhaps, because if others at home don't share our enthusiastic Christian convictions and commitments, we're going to have to try to show them that this is something real and these things are important for everybody, without coming across as pompous and pious – without us giving any impression that we think we know better than everybody else.

Those of us who have always lived within family settings where Christian faith was warmly held and strongly practiced maybe don't always realise that it can be very different in other families where maybe a wife or a husband, a son or a daughter, finds themselves as the only member of the family who professes Christian faith with any degree of reality.

And yet, we need to be people who show and share our faith at home – even if that makes the road hard sometimes.

2. **It was hard because it is hard. (vs.7-13) (7)**

The next part of today's section in mark tells us about Jesus beginning to send the disciples out to the surrounding villages – to preach and to heal, in the way that he had been doing. As he did so, he warned them, straightforwardly, that it would not always be very easy.

- It would be hard because it might mean 'doing without things':

(8) *Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money.*

- And it would be hard because they wouldn't always get a very enthusiastic welcome. They would have lots of exciting encouragements, but: (9)

If any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave.

Jesus was making sure that his disciples understood that when it comes to following him, 'it does exactly what it says on the tin' – *take up your cross and follow me every day.*

This might be something that we need to hear. Even though we might not be like those disciples - out on the front line of evangelism- we maybe are much more inclined to like the friendships of Christian faith, the inner assurance of Christian faith, the future hopes of Christian faith, better than we like the ideas of hard tasks and serious commitment in our lives.

Christian discipleship will be hard because it is hard.

During the Presbytery Missionary tour a couple of weeks ago, some of us heard about how hard it is for many Christians in India who sometimes face very difficult experiences in their families and villages, and in their job situations – simply because they are Christians or have become Christians, having come from a Hindu or Moslem background.

It might be true to say that it is even more difficult for Christians in neighbouring Pakistan – and yet those Christian people are

willing to put up with life being made harder because they are so deeply convinced by, and committed to, faith in Jesus Christ.

When I think about what we are like as Christians, I'm not too sure that we have a very high pain threshold. We're not really willing to commit ourselves very seriously much of the time, and it doesn't even take all that very much to push aside whatever commitment is there.

i) Take our Christian commitment to be people who give top priority to worship, to learning from the Bible, to prayer – how hard, or easy, is it to knock us off that very basic Christian commitment? Is it very difficult for other things to come in between?

We've had a busy week, or a busy Saturday, and therefore we opt for a rest on Sunday. Or we want to do something else on Sunday, even though we've had a busy week!

And we could just as easily ask ourselves the same sort of questions about the midweek meetings for Bible Study or Prayer. Although it might sometimes make life just a tiny, little bit harder for us in terms of priorities, is that sort of discipline not part of taking up our cross to follow Jesus – as well as being the key to a deeper, stronger faith that will 'work' when the road is rough.

ii) Or what about commitment of some time and effort in Christian service. Are we willing for that to make life a wee bit harder for us sometimes?

I know that some people certainly are – they give such dedicated service week after week, year after year – and many of us are only too willing to let them. They make hard choices to make such service possible – they sacrifice time that could easily be spent in other ways – it's amazing what some people are able to fit into already busy lives, because they have recognised that this is an important part of following Jesus.

And yet for some of the rest of us, it just seems too hard – sometimes because other things seem too important.

I can't tell you what is possible in your life – but I should tell you that following Jesus sometimes asks us to make commitments that are a wee bit hard at times – life would appear to be easier if we didn't have them. But that's the way Jesus told his disciples it would be.

Sometimes Christian life wouldn't demand so much of some people, if the rest of us were willing to share the load and play our part.

iii) Or what about money matters? Is there any sense in which following Jesus might make life harder in that regard?

I think that there probably is, and that many of us haven't really faced that possibility too seriously. When Jesus told his disciples that they were to *take no money in their belts*, I don't think that he was dismissing the place of money in our daily lives – but maybe he was reminding us that Christian people need to get money into its proper place. When we do get that a bit more right, then we might find it easier to give the money that is needed for the work of Christ in our own 'church place' and out from our own church into the bigger world.

Sometimes I fear we often give in such a way that we won't really miss it, or we give after we have covered everything else that we want to spend our money on. And when it's like that in our financial Christian commitment, it may not be too hard for us, but it may be very hard for the church to do the work Christ wants it to do. Maybe there is something for us to think about there.

When Jesus sent out those disciples he told them that it would be hard because that's the way it is – and I suppose it is fairly difficult for us to argue that it should be any different now. It is hard because it is hard. We must accept that if our Christian faith is for real.

3. It was hard because it cost him his head. (14-29) (10)

After a big party in Herod's palace, John the Baptist's head ended up on a platter! Herod had made a foolish promise to his step daughter when she danced at the party, and her mother, who hated John, asked for him to be executed and his head presented on a platter.

There was a background to this sordid episode.

This was Herod's second wife – he had got rid of his first wife and married a woman called Herodias, who was actually his brother's wife. Obviously Herod had driven a coach and horses through the whole moral and life-long commitment of marriage – and John had had the courage to tell Herod so.

No doubt Herod and Herodias had put up reasons why it was OK for them to do what they had done – but John told them straight that it was wrong.

Perhaps it is not only in ancient royal families that the Christian convictions and values of marriage are ignored – and perhaps it is not just in royal families!

But the point is this – John made his life harder than it needed to be because he felt he needed to say something – that it was his Christian responsibility.

I have a feeling that John must have done it fairly carefully and sensitively – because we are told that even after putting John in prison, Herod liked to listen John, and continued to respect John as a good and holy man.

(11) *Herod feared John and protected him knowing him to be a righteous and holy man he liked to listen to him.* (vs. 20)

It sounds as if, deep down, Herod knew that John was right, even if Herodias, his wife was waiting her chance to really take her vengeance out on John – as she did at the party – when John's faith and faithfulness to God's truth cost him his head.

When we try to apply this part to ourselves, it may not always be just as bad as it was for John, but maybe the basic point is that be faithful to Christ will sometimes have some cost.

What are the sort of situations where even if it doesn't cost us our head, it might still make things quite hard for us.

Well I suppose that there is a point here about any time when we have to pluck up the courage and tell other people that, for us, faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and commitment to his ways, is the foundation for our lives.

I think that there is something for us to learn from John – that even though he was very straight in what he said to Herod, he still worked hard to retain Herod's respect – he didn't go out of his way to hurt Herod unnecessarily – he tried to stay on fairly friendly terms with him. Sometimes, when we try to stand up for our Christian faith and standards, we can sound a bit harsh and a bit lacking in any kind of human feeling for others and their situations, and that never helps.

Mind you, it often comes out like that because we are nervous and uncertain about saying what we want to say – and we compensate for our nervousness by sounding dogmatic and unsympathetic.

Maybe we need to encourage each other to be people who have the courage to say something for Jesus and our faith in him, but to say it in a way that is as friendly and humble and non-threatening as possible – to say it in as non-judgmental a way as possible – even though the need to get people thinking about Jesus and the gospel is as important as the very judgment of God at the end of the day.

So it will probably be a hard, but necessary, part of Christian faith to be people who as disciples of Jesus share in the task of being witnesses for Jesus – like those first disciples who were sent out to spread the message that they had heard from Jesus. We are often very reluctant to do that.

There is at least one more application of this section of Mark where John's faith cost him his head. It's an application which makes us think about how it can sometimes be hard for Church and leaders in churches.

What should we do when we see relationships and situations that we know are not right – just as John saw that Herod’s marriage record and relationships were not right?

For example, it is very difficult for a church or its leaders, or parents, to have to deal with the common reality of couples choosing to live together rather than get married.

It is a very complex issue for churches to deal with situations where it looks as if the life-long commitments of marriage have been lightly thrown aside.

It was difficult for John, and it will probably be difficult for us.

- It takes sensitive wisdom and awareness to recognise those situations where people have been innocent victims.

- It takes carefully judged wisdom in those situations where it seems fairly clear that the situation is not as the Christian way would want – where we are trying to help and encourage but not to ignore or condone - often straight talking privately, and looking for signs of new willingness to do things differently publicly.

If we are to accept John as our example, the Church cannot simply provide superficial respectability to situations that do not match what the Bible tells us is the Christian norm. It is a mightily hard task to balance Christian principle with pastoral help.

It is always a good start when people understand that the Christian Faith and the Christian Church have standards that cannot be set aside – then it is so much easier to help people.

This is one of those areas where Christian people can support their church leaders by their prayers, for it is a very hard thing to say difficult things to other people if, like me, you don’t enjoy unpleasant confrontation – and yet, sometimes, you have to be a little bit cruel to be kind!

Just as for John, there is no point in just being popular by ducking the issues, and yet at the same time, like John we have to try to keep the channels of communication open if at all possible, so

that people may hear what the Gospel has to say to those situations.

It's a hard thing to say the hard things – and it is a hard thing to hear the hard things said. But that's the lesson of today's section in Mark.

For the overall point in this part of Mark is that trusting in Jesus and following him may sometimes make life harder than it would otherwise be.

Christian faith is not just about friendships, support, inspiration, assurance and hope – it is also about courage and commitment and cost. (12)

We have to ask ourselves if our faith knows much about those things.

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(12) **It's about Courage and Commitment and Cost.**