

Grasping and Missing

Mark 8:27-33

Introduction

How quickly can you go from hero to zero? Many of us will know of sporting situations where an athlete or a team has victory completely in the bag only to see it snatched away. As I've never been particularly good at sport (I didn't earn the nickname 'Dunco-the-unco' for no reason!) I enjoyed a chuckle when I was sent a link to a video collection of sporting events where the leader or the leading team in an event has started to celebrate too early only to lose in the dying moments.

It's not just sport though. The 18 year old gets her licence, and has worked hard to buy the nice second hand car and now she can drive it without supervision (feeling like a hero!) ... right into the pole at the shopping centre carpark! Or the uni student who has been spending time with the attractive young lady in his course and finally she seems to notice him. The man is overjoyed when she walks over and sits next to him at lunch and he hears her say, "I've been looking for you..." only for the sentence to finish, "I was wondering if you could give me the number of your friend who visited you last week? I wanted to ask him to the dance next weekend." (He now feels like a zero!)

This morning we're looking at this little story of Peter declaring that Jesus is the Messiah only for Peter to then be told off because he wanted to tell Jesus what type of Messiah he should be. We'll see how quickly there can be a great high, feeling like a hero, to then being disappointed and left feeling like a zero.

Maybe One Who Prepares The Way (vv. 27-28)

The scene is set in verses 27 and 28 with the disciples travelling along with Jesus and Jesus asking them, "Who do people say I am?" The disciples, in turn, answer Jesus, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

The general feeling about Jesus by those who had heard about him, or seen his actions, or heard him teach, was the Jesus was a pretty special man. People seemed to believe that Jesus was something of a holy man with a message from God like one of the prophets or maybe, even more uniquely, as the person whom Yahweh would send to prepare the way for Yahweh's decisive action. In Malachi 4:5 we read, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." So this explains why some people had thought that Jesus may have been Elijah. The character of Elijah was also recognised in John the Baptist (who really did come to fulfil that role) and so, like Herod, some people had wondered if Jesus was John the Baptist.

Though this conversation is interesting historically, and would have been of interest to Jesus and the disciples, there's not much emotion involved here. Yes, this is the opinion of the general populous, but such opinions can essentially be held at arm's length. Things change though when we hear the opinion of those with whom we have a close relationship because in them we have invested something of ourselves. It's their opinion that Jesus now asks.

Peter's Rise and Fall (vv. 29-33)

Jesus asks the disciples, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Into the silence jumps Peter. Peter had long been recognised as something of a leader amongst the disciples, probably ever since Jesus started calling him Peter instead of Simon, and here Peter's boldness hits the mark. Peter correctly identifies who Jesus is. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus wasn't just a prophet who had a message from God and nor was he like Elijah or John who would prepare the way for Yahweh's decisive actions, Jesus is the One anointed by God to bring in God's kingdom and so will actually perform Yahweh's decisive actions.

The account we have in Mark is typically brief. Matthew describes in his Gospel how pleased Jesus is that this identification has been made and how blessed Peter is

to have made it. This is recorded in Matthew 16:17-20, “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”

Mark’s brevity is partly because this Gospel is simply the shortest and it’s Mark’s style to always be moving the story on, but it’s also possible that there’s another reason for the brevity here. If Peter is the source of Mark’s material, which the historical information suggests, then we have here an occasion where Peter is comfortable for his failings to be included but wants to downplay the significance of his recognition of who Jesus truly is. Maybe the memory of his failures is still strong in Peter’s memory and so he would prefer that just his initial acknowledgement of who Jesus is be mentioned with no dramatic praise or comment being deserved.

So here we have Peter’s high. Peter must have felt like a hero to have correctly identified Jesus. This must show that Peter has more of an ‘in’ with Jesus than other. Surely being this close will mean that Peter will have Jesus’ ear should the need arise for Jesus to receive a little friendly advice from Peter.

Peter does indeed see Jesus as being in need of his advice when Jesus starts talking about betrayal, suffering and death being in his future, “[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

What on earth is Jesus talking about? Alright, Jesus had made clear that he wasn’t going to be the kind of Messiah that the Pharisees and leaders had talked about but how did outright betrayal, suffering and being killed come into this? Peter can’t stand for this. Peter’s going to tell Jesus to pull his head in and stop being such a pessimist. You’re going to win, Jesus. Just you watch!

Jesus' response to Peter is firm and decisive and brings Peter quickly back down from any illusions of being a hero.

“But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’”

Jesus obviously recognises that Peter's opinion of Jesus' future betrayal, suffering and death was shared by the other disciples and so Jesus pointedly speaks about where such thoughts come from. Peter speaking the way he does is giving voice to Satan who opposes God and his kingdom and Satan has tempted Peter to speak in the way he does by pricking his very human concerns. It is human to want your friend and leader to succeed in the way you and the world expect success should look. Betrayal, suffering and death rarely are markers of success!

It's really important to notice in the way Jesus corrects Peter how Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus isn't saying here, “Get out of my sight, Peter.” Jesus doesn't say something like, “For crying out loud Peter! Go and read about the suffering servant in Isaiah and then come and tell me again what the Messiah should look like!” No, Jesus tells Peter to “Get behind me, Satan!” Yes, Peter is terribly wrong and is really giving voice to the being who opposes God's plans but Jesus doesn't angrily cast Peter aside. Jesus wants Peter to fall back into line as a disciple.

A disciple is a follower and Jesus wants Peter to move from standing in front, presuming to tell Jesus what to do and again be Jesus' follower and from that position to learn again what Jesus being the Messiah means. Yes, Peter may have felt that he dropped quickly from being a hero to zero but this wasn't the end of his relationship with Jesus and Jesus invited Peter to stay close and keep learning.

Jesus' High and Low (vv. 29-33)

So then, in thinking about feeling of going from hero to zero we've had the chance to look at Peter, the man who told many of these stories to Mark to write down, and it's pretty obvious how he experienced such emotions but I think there's someone else in this story who would also have experienced high and low emotions.

How would Jesus have been feeling through this interaction? Jesus has asked what the general reaction to him was but then makes himself vulnerable to his friends. Jesus takes the risk of finding out what the people closest to him think about him. Jesus is asking the same people who frustrated him at times by not understanding what he's talking about, by being so slow to pick up the meaning of miracles and who seemed bewildered as to who Jesus truly was. Jesus risks asking **them** what they think of him?!

Knowing how many times Jesus had been frustrated or disappointed by the disciples we can get an idea of how exciting it must have been for Jesus to hear from Peter the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah! No wonder we have that record in Matthew's Gospel which started "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, [...]" Finally! One of the disciples gets it!! I don't know if we can say that Jesus would have felt like a hero at that moment but he certainly would have been on a high! Jesus would have felt relief and thankfulness that at last there was understanding by one of his closest friends as to who he was and the role he had.

In the light of this feeling of relief that there was understanding Jesus opens up and starts to share more of the hard journey ahead of him as the Messiah. "[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this [...]"

With Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus having hope that they finally have more understanding he perhaps shares this because he doesn't want his friends to be confused or distressed by what is to come and it's important that they understand that the task is not going to be easy for Jesus. He might also be looking for their support.

In stead of their support and understanding what does Jesus get? A firmly worded rebuke from Peter! Not only that but Jesus could see in the eyes of the other

disciples that they agreed with Peter. Jesus' emotions go from being at hero level to zero level in a flash!

I wonder if it was the contrast in emotions as well as the genuine temptation of Peter's challenge which resulted in the firmness of Jesus' rebuke. Maybe Jesus in looking at Peter and the disciples felt the temptation to be the Messiah that they wanted but had to reject it because he knew the Messiah that they needed. Jesus knew that if he became the conquering victorious Messiah who ruled politically it may have resulted in more 'fun' time with the disciple and fulfilled their human concerns but it wouldn't have addressed the concerns of God which was how to have a restored relationship with humanity.

Indeed, it can be said that Jesus accepted the path of being a zero because he knew that that was the only path that God had made and which humans needed.

Conclusion

In our lives there will be times we will go from feeling like a hero to feeling like a zero and it can be in situations far more serious than sport. We are blessed with children and rejoice at their growth only to see an accident or illness reach in and threaten to take them from us. We have a God who entered the world, experienced pain and loss, and was made a zero so that we can have hope even when the darkneses closes in.

And when in our relationship with God we go from feeling like we've made great strides in our spiritual life to then doing something which we know will bitterly disappoint our Father in heaven, the words of Jesus are not, "get out of my sight" but rather a firm and clear, "get back into line. Stay close to me so you can keep learning like you need to."

[Song, Open The Eyes of My Heart, in response]