**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2024
MARK 8: 31 - 38
ST. PAUL’S AND ST. JOHN’S**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

So where are we in the story this morning? Well, we’re about half way through the gospel: the earliest and shortest gospel, the one very likely dictated by Peter’s righthand man, Marcus. An early bishop remarked that Mark had his facts pretty well right, but didn’t always relate events in the order they happened. Jesus is now getting closer to the end of his mission on the Galilee. He has formed his posse of the twelve apostles, been baptized by his cousin John in the river Jordan, fed the five thousand, done healings beyond counting, cast out many a demon, walked on the water, and just recently Peter has recognized Jesus as the Messiah: in short Jesus has created one whale of a sensation in the area. The stories of the real McCoy, a genuine healer and
restorer of balance, are filling the hearts of the poor and oppressed with joy and hope. The Jews have been under harsh Roman occupation for decades now, indeed for the last six hundred years Jewish history has been one of oppression, harsh treatment and misery. And at last, at long last, they are beginning to hope for better things.

They are, in fact, expecting another David, a new Messiah, who will restore the Jewish kingdom, with military might and power, here on earth, a material, earthly kingdom, and send the blankety blank Romans home.

So, when Jesus openly says that he’s going to endure unbearable suffering and be executed and then rise again: well, naturally nobody wants to hear it. Peter and the other apostles cannot believe what they are hearing. No, no, that’s not what they are expecting to hear, not the kind of Messiah they were counting on. And Peter, good ol’ impetuous Peter, the kind of fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread, but still the leader of the apostles, takes Jesus to one side, and tells Jesus that you can't say that! Sheesh, you’ll lose all your followers if they think you’re going to fail in leading a revolution!

Now, just for a moment, think of Jesus’ position. The Son of God, full of divine
compassion and love, quite literally on a mission from God, bent on saving the human race from sin and destruction: this Jesus is living in a human body. He needs to eat and drink, he sweats, he bleeds when hurt, he can get sick, he’s far from invulnerable, the envelope of human flesh he needs to wear in order to convince human beings to come to God; that very human body can feel pain. And naturally, Jesus isn’t exactly looking forward to the torture of crucifixion, even though it was planned and necessary.

So, we can now see why Jesus calls Peter ‘Satan’, and tells him to get lost. He reminds Peter that he isn’t an earthly Messiah, but a divine one, who comes to bring eternal life to his flock, and the price is the greatest sacrifice ever made.

Jesus begins to be more and more open about the suffering that Peter and the disciples can expect if they choose to follow Jesus.

And here we are in the season of Lent, a time when we are called upon to repent our sins, to cast the Satan of material longings behind us, a time to turn to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. A time to reject our past mistakes, and resolve to do better. After two thousand odd years, we know how the story turns out, but let us put ourselves in the place of the disciples who follow Jesus along that dark road leading to what they couldn’t fathom or understand. It is time to sorrow over our sins and backslidings, time to feel the agony, time to be sad about all the sins of the world that so upset God that he sent his only son, the completely innocent, sinless bringer of peace and love to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Let us ask ourselves, are we doing enough to relieve the misery of the world? Can we do more to follow in Jesus’ footsteps? Feeding the hungry, tending the sick, giving water to them who thirst, basically loving our neighbours? This is the time to be honest about it, you can’t totally fool yourself anyway, and it’s silly to try. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself if you are really doing enough. Yes, it can hurt. No, it isn’t easy. Suffer now, rejoice later.

Because, two thousand years of telling and retelling the story later, we know that in the end it turns out gloriously. But Jesus couldn’t rise until he had been executed on the cross, an agonizing and humiliating death. Just so, we need to go through the mourning and preparation of Lent before we get to Easter.

I dislike talking about sin, when I think about some of the things I have done, it makes me writhe in the middle of the night. It has to be done. But I quit such subjects as soon as I can.

But I have some comfort to offer: the Holy Spirit is here with us, now and always,
everywhere we go. The Spirit can help us to shed the weakness of sin, so that when our time comes, we too may hope and count on receiving eternal life with God in Heaven. Suffering now in order to rejoice later, with the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us. Brothers and sisters, it can be done. How cool is that?
*Amen*.