**A Reading from Mark’s Gospel, chapter 8,**

**beginning to read at verse 27**

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi.

On the way he asked them, **“Who do people say I am?”**

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 **“But what about you?”** he asked.

**“Who do you say I am?”**

Peter answered, **“You are the Messiah.”**

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

31 He 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.

32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside,

and began to rebuke him.

33 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.”**

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples,

and said:

**“Whoever wants to be my disciple**

**must deny themselves,**

**and take up their cross and follow me.**

**35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,**

**but whoever loses their life for me**

**and for the gospel will save it.**

**36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?**

**37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?**

**38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation,**

**the Son of Man will be ashamed of them,**

**when he comes in his Father’s glory**

**with the holy angels.”**

There comes a time in the life of every Christian when we have to come to grips with the person of Jesus Christ and our relationship to him.

We can weigh the witness of scripture and take into account all the commentaries on the life of Christ.

We can consider the views others, past and present,

but we can’t escape this one central question:

**Who do you say that I am?**

So, let’s put **ourselves** in the story and ask,

**“What is my relationship with Jesus Christ?”**

The text begins with a question we can all relate to:

* Who do the people say that I am?
* How do others see me?
* By what name and traits and deeds am I known?
* The question strikes at the heart of our quest for identity:
* If others were asked to describe me today,
* what would they say?

The most common way for others to know us is by name. Our name is more than a label, it reflects who we are – our family heritage and our self-identity.

I used to do a children’s sermon in which I’d intentionally call each child by the wrong name. I’d look at Suzy and call her Jane. Then I’d look at Sean and call him David. They always protested: “That’s not my name!”

And they wouldn’t let me go on until I got it right.

The children were perceptive.

Your name is a symbol of who you are. It influences how others think of you and how you think of yourself.

Have you ever thought about the relationship between your name and your personality?

We’ve seen the little books that list various names and their meanings. Perhaps, there’s some truth to this.

In many ways a name can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that can help shape us into the person we become.

So does our vocation. One of the first questions we normally ask of someone we don’t know is,

“What do you do for a living?”

Perhaps it’s no coincidence that most of the people in my family tree were Farmers and farm-labourers.

One reason why Jesus was such an enigma for the people of his day is that they couldn’t quite pin him down to a vocation they understood.

Was he a rabbi? Some said he was, but then, he didn’t sound like the other rabbis.

Remember what Mark said?

**“They were astonished at his teaching,  
for he taught them as having authority,  
and not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22)**

Was he a prophet? He sounded like a prophet at times,

but then, unlike the prophets before him, he loved to socialise. He attended weddings and had dinner with wealthy people. He didn’t fit the Mold.

The people of Jesus’ day didn’t know what to think of him.

It’s no different for us today.

We expect others to conform to certain expectations.

Where is the gospel in this story?

Where is the Good News in this text?

Don’t we think the terror seems to overshadow the amazement today?

Well, let’s see if we can get lost in the story long enough for it to make some faithful sense.

We start off well enough with Peter proclaiming Jesus to be “the Messiah!” But then things go south pretty quickly — Jesus tells the disciples (**and us**) that he:

* must **suffer**,
* be **rejected**,
* be **killed**,
* and **rise** on the third day.

That’s when Peter tries, in his own way, to save Him

from all of that horror,

but Jesus goes and calls him **“Satan”** and then we’ve got Jesus telling anyone who will listen

**(and that too would include us)**

if you want to be his disciple you have to set your mind on divine things and not human things — and the way to do that is by denying yourself, taking up your cross,

and following Jesus.

And if all of that isn’t troubling enough, Jesus tops it off by saying that if we want to save our lives,

we have to be willing to lose our lives for Jesus’ sake,

and the sake of the gospel, because what sense is there in gaining all of the material goods of the whole world,

but losing our lives in the process?

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What we’ve got here doesn’t sound so much like good news as it sounds like a list of unpleasant things Jesus expects of us. Denying ourselves? Taking up our cross? Following Jesus into suffering, rejection, and death? It’s almost enough to make you want to turn the page and move on to sunnier times.

**But we’re not going to do that**. We’re not going run away just because these are hard things to hear, let alone do.

Take Jesus’ announcement that he must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise on the third day.

We know all of that. We know that’s part of the story,

part of God’s plan

but that doesn’t make it any less easy to hear.

Why do you think so many people come to church on Palm Sunday and on Easter Sunday but then, skip Good Friday. It’s too painful to hear. Suffering, rejection, blood, pain, crucifixion, death. I think I’ll hold out for the **Easter parade.**

That was Peter’s thinking too.

He didn’t like what he heard any more than we do.

But Peter thought he could do something about it.

He took Jesus aside to set him straight, to tell Jesus he didn’t have to do all those things. – **Big Mistake -**

Jesus instantly recognized Peter as **TEMPTATION** disguised as a **FRIEND**.

The temptation to be something other than the **Beloved Son** had followed him all the way out of the desert.

The temptation to choose

* another path,
* a human path,
* an easier path,
* a path other than God’s

was staring at him through Peter’s eyes.

Jesus sees the situation for what it is and scolds Peter by saying, **“Get behind me, Satan.”**

But **we** still might scratch our heads and wonder why Jesus had to suffer and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes?

Why these three groups? Were they the bad guys?

No, precisely the opposite. These three groups make up the Sanhedrin, the ruling body over Israel’s the religious life.

Elders were lay members. Chief priests were made up of the high priest and his predecessors.

Scribes were the scholars in Torah law.

These three groups did not represent humanity at its worst, but humanity at its best!

The suffering and death of Jesus was the result of the careful deliberations of the most respected religious leaders in all of Israel who justified their actions by the highest standards of law and morality,

even believing their actions to be an arm of God’s will.

Why is this important? Because it tells us no matter how “good” or “decent” or “law abiding” we may be,

we are still sinners in need of a saviour.

And Jesus is our saviour.

He is the one who brings about salvation through a divine plan, not a human one.

Denying our selves has to do with our will.

The question is, “What’s the controlling factor in our life?

Is it our will, or is it Jesus Christ?

**Jesus’ call to deny the self is a call to deny,**

**the instinct of self-preservation at all costs.**

Let’s think about this.

What happens if salvation is turned into nothing more than “fire insurance,”

bought and paid for by one confession of faith made a long time ago, and followed up by being **“a good person”**?

We’ve got to ask, **“Is that a real faith?**”

The cross Jesus calls us to take up looks like answering a neighbour’s call for help at 3 a.m., or coming to the aid of a perfect stranger who lies bleeding in the middle of the street.

Taking up our cross means seeing the needs of others and acting faithfully by sharing in their suffering.

I heard the story recently of a youth group that travelled to a big city to work with the homeless.

Upon their arrival, the youth group was glad to hand out gifts of sweets to the homeless who had gathered to greet them. But one man looked disgruntled.

He approached one of the kids and said sternly,

**“We don’t need candy. What we need are socks.”**

The youth was stunned. He realized that candy and sweets were what the **young people** wanted.

They’d been thinking more about themselves than about those whom they were called to serve.

So this youth**, this kid**, sat down on the curb and took off his shoes and socks and gave his socks to the man.

The other boy saw this and did the same.

And for the rest of the week no one in that youth group wore any socks, they gave them all away.

They denied themselves, took up the cross of common need and shared the suffering.

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This is what Jesus calls us to. He calls us away from thinking about ourselves, - away from a focus on things that are all about “me” and “getting mine”, and toward a focus that is all about Jesus - a focus that moves us to join in the suffering of our neighbours. He calls us to live **sock-less lives** of care and compassion where we lose ourselves in the moment that is **NOW**, for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of our neighbours in need. **Amen**.