

THE DANGER IN TALKING ABOUT JESUS

Scriptures: Mark 8:27-38; I Corinthians 1:18-25

I want to begin by showing you a picture. [**Touchdown Jesus**] This is a 132 foot high stone mosaic of Jesus over the entrance to the library at the University of Notre Dame. It is patterned after a number of mosaics that I saw in Italy from the middle ages, especially the halo and the gold background around Jesus' head. Jesus stands in majesty over people of all nations. He is the king reigning in glory surrounded by the saints.

It is a magnificent mosaic, except for one thing. The entrance to the library is situated so that this picture of Jesus faces the end zone at the Notre Dame football stadium. [**Touchdown Jesus over Stadium**] From the stadium you can look toward the end zone, and there stands Jesus with his arms raised, as if Notre Dame has just scored. The students call it "Touchdown Jesus."

I am going to leave that picture up for a moment while I talk about today's scripture reading from Mark. After asking his disciples about what other people say of him, Jesus turns to them and says, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah," or in Greek he uses the word "Christ." You are the Christ, the Messiah, the promised king.

Peter has a definite picture in mind. Jewish people in Jesus' time were hoping for a king who would throw out the Romans and establish God's kingdom on earth. There is a Jewish writing from before the time of Jesus called *The Psalms of Solomon*. These psalms are not found in the Bible, but they reflect the hopes that Jewish people had for the Messiah prior to the birth of Jesus. One of the psalms says,

O Lord, raise up their king, the son of David, that he may reign over Israel thy servant. Gird him with strength that he might shatter unrighteous rulers, that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample her to destruction. ... He shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in righteousness, and he shall judge the tribes of the people that have been sanctified by the Lord his God (quoted by James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 250).

That is Touchdown Jesus. [**Touchdown Jesus**] That is what Peter and the other disciples hoped Jesus would do: defeat the Romans, rid the nation of godlessness, lift up the poor and oppressed, and, along the way, cut taxes, balance the budget, guarantee security, provide universal health care, restore morality, and make the economy strong again. They wanted Jesus for president.

But Jesus rebukes Peter. The pew Bible says that he spoke sternly to them, but that is putting it mildly. The Greek text of the New Testament uses the same word in verse 30 as in verse 33. Verse 33 says, "But turning and looking at his disciples, he [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" The same Greek word is used in verse 30. Jesus did not just speak sternly to them, he *rebuked* them. He told them, "Don't you dare talk about me like this to

anyone else.” It is as if Peter painted a giant mosaic of Jesus reigning in glory, and Jesus put a black drape over it to hide it. **[Black out of Touchdown Jesus]**

This is not the first time in Mark’s gospel that Jesus has done this. Take a pew Bible and turn to Mark, chapter 1, beginning at verse 23 (NT, p. 35). Jesus encounters a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. In verse 24 the unclean spirit or spirits in the man cry out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” The demon knows the same thing as Peter. But the next verse says, “Jesus rebuked him [same word], saying, “Be silent and come out of him!”

Now turn to chapter 3, verses 11-12, where the same thing happens again. Jesus heals many people of illnesses, including people who have unclean spirits. Verse 11 says, “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’” The next verse says, “But he sternly ordered them [in Greek the word is *rebuked*]*—*he rebuked them not to make him known.” It is the same thing he said to the disciples: “Don’t you dare tell anyone who I am.”

What kind of evangelism is that? Why doesn’t Jesus want anyone to tell who he is? Doesn’t he want us to know that he is the Messiah? Doesn’t he want people to know that he is the Son of God, the promised king? Why Jesus does want to put a drape over this magnificent picture of him as the king of glory?

Perhaps because it will give us the wrong idea. Let me go back to chapter 8 and read again verse 31: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Jesus substitutes a different picture for Touchdown Jesus. It is the picture of a man suffering humiliation carrying a cross. **[Jesus carrying cross]** It is a picture of Tragic Jesus.

That is not the picture Peter had in mind when he called Jesus the Messiah. Verse 32: “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Peter rebukes Jesus because he wants to go back to Touchdown Jesus. **[Touchdown Jesus]** But Jesus will not let him. Verse 33: “But turning and looking at his disciples he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus insists on going back to Tragic Jesus **[Jesus carrying cross]** not Touchdown Jesus.

Jesus makes clear that he will triumph in the end. He says in verse 31, “After three days I will rise again.” He also says in verse 38, “Those who are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Jesus is coming again in glory to reign as king. **[Touchdown Jesus over Stadium]** In that sense the mosaic of Jesus over the Notre Dame library is correct. But he does not guarantee any touchdowns along the way, especially not last year for Notre Dame.

Quite the contrary. Jesus not only says that he will carry a cross. He says that Peter and the rest of us will too. Verse 34: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” **[Peter’s Crucifixion]** According to tradition when Peter was crucified in the time of Nero, he asked to be put on the cross upside down, because he

did not consider himself worthy of dying in the same way as Jesus. For many of Jesus' first disciples, following him meant literally dying for him.

That same is still true today. **[Newspaper Headline]** A Nov. 2, 1998, *Spokesman-Review* news story had this headline: "Christians dying for their faith." This Associated Press story tells how Christians in various countries, including Sudan, Egypt, Burma, and China, have been arrested, tortured, and sometimes murdered for belonging to, converting to, or inviting someone to a Christian church. **[End slides]**

I am grateful that none of those things are likely to happen to any of us sitting here this morning. I am thankful that none of us sitting here are likely to be arrested, tortured, or stripped of our civil rights for believing in Jesus. I give thanks for our nation's heritage of religious freedom and for those who have given their lives to defend it. But let's be clear. Even for us, especially for us, there are some sacrifices we will have to make to follow Jesus. Following Jesus will cost you your life. It may not result in being arrested or executed. But it will mean that your life is no longer your own. It may mean that instead of making touchdowns you are touching lives. It may mean that instead of accumulating wealth you are sharing it, instead of dominating others you are serving them, instead of doing what you please you are doing what pleases God.

During his time as a college chaplain, Will Willimon frequently lamented the relatively small proportion of students who attend chapel. All ministers do that. We all feel like failures because more people don't come to church. But one day as he expressed frustration about this, a student said to him, "Go easy on yourself. Your message is against just about everything we are giving our lives to around here. Students have enough sense to know that following Jesus could only make our lives more difficult. I'm amazed that you have so many who show up" (*Pulpit Resources*, Jan.-Mar. 2008, p. 27).

Maybe I should be impressed that so many of you show up. It is dangerous to talk about Jesus, especially if you think that Jesus will make everything go your way. In the end Jesus will make everything go his way, which is the best way. But along the way it will not be easy for him or for us.

- Ken Onstot
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