

Mark 8: 31-38

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^(a) 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."

It is a moment of high tension and drama. At the pivot-point of Mark's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples who he is, and Peter, in a moment of great clarity recognises that his friend and teacher is not merely a prophet, great as that would be, but the Messiah, the promised son of David, the king of kings, the one who will free his people from tyranny, and into the promised rule of God's true kingdom. Peter must have been thinking through what that implied, what it really meant for Jesus, and for the disciples. Battle, but victory, risk but also reward — an end to Roman rule, and positions of authority for Jesus's closest friends!

Jesus knows what he's thinking and he warns them all — 'no! I'm going to suffer many things and die (but rise again). This is a road of rejection, more than glory.'

Peter is having none of it — he won't hear this negativity! 'You're the messiah! You're powerful! What's with this suffering and rejection nonsense?'

And this is where Jesus gives his most astounding warning — 'get behind me Satan!'

I want to look at this moment by comparing it with a parallel moment in a work of fiction, the Lord of the Rings.

Frodo has inherited a magic ring, which his wizard friend Gandalf proves is the lost ring of power, forged by the evil Sauron in a previous age. Sauron is growing in strength and amassing armies, and is about to overrun all middle earth with his agents of evil. And he wants his ring back.

Frodo travels with eight companions south, towards Sauron's kingdom — Mordor — but also Rohan and Gondor, the nations that will suffer the weight of Sauron's attack. Still, they are not all agreed on their course of action. Boromir, a prince of Gondor and a mighty fighter, has only one thing on his mind, and at the crucial moment he draws Frodo to one side and tries to persuade him.

'The ring of power is a gift!' he argues. 'We must use the ring to fight against Sauron! Give it to me and Gondor can fight and win!'

Frodo is wiser than this. He has seen how the ring can torment and corrupt its holders, how even the thought of it can cast a spell on people, driving them to obsession and evil, just with the thought of it. He knows that Boromir means well, but that Boromir could not bear the power. He, himself, has worn the ring on only a handful of occasions. It is only a burden, not a blessing, to him. And he knows that the only thing to do is to destroy the ring utterly. No one should have

such power at their command, be they good or evil. Frodo has never wanted the quest, but as he is confronted by Boromir his course becomes clearer — *he* must bear the ring, no one else, and he must carry it right into Sauron's kingdom, Mordor, to destroy it in the only place it can be destroyed, the place it was forged, in the fiery heart of Mount Orodruin.

As Boromir gets angrier, Frodo becomes more scared and runs away, using the ring again to turn invisible and escape Boromir. And then a party of orcs attack the company, scattered across the wooded hillside by the river. Boromir, coming to his senses fights to protect the other hobbits and dies doing so; Frodo flees back to the boats to cross the river, alone. Sam, his most faithful friend realises what is happening, and wades into the river, even though he can't swim. The fellowship is broken. Frodo is taking the ring straight towards Sauron, and the rest of the fellowship, surviving the attack, must do whatever they can to aid Rohan and Gondor in the war of the ring...

Now, why do you suppose I think there is a parallel here, beyond a confrontation between apparent allies over the right course to take?

Clearly, I think that Peter rebuking Jesus is being Boromir at this moment. He has seen that Jesus has power, and surely that power should be used to defeat evil! At exactly the moment when Jesus should be planning how to use his power to crush the enemy he talks of defeat. Why would you do such a thing? Why would you gift victory to the enemy?

But Jesus and Frodo are wiser than that. Sauron cannot imagine having the ring of power and wanting to destroy it. He has only ever lusted after power, and this has veiled his imagination. He cannot conceive of someone seeking to destroy it — so he cannot guard against a little hobbit simply walking into Mordor to destroy *his precious*.

Satan, the fallen angel, is fallen precisely because he has seen the great power of God almighty and coveted it. The evil of the world is accomplished by those who place their own desires over the care of others, and who use their power to get what they want.

The narrative of the gospel is so many things, but it is certainly a story of power, and its misuse, and God's addressing of the sinfulness behind the human *will to power*.

The remarkable thing about Jesus is the power of the creator is housed in human form *and he uses this power so little, and only for the good of others*. Jesus could do anything — except he couldn't because his good character means he self-limits his actions. Could he smite down Pilate and Herod with a thunderbolt? Theoretically, yes. But that would not be good. The way to defeat evil is to hold all power and give it up; to walk into hell to destroy the power of power; to submit to evil to expose it for what it is.

And this, declares Jesus, is what we must do as well. We must take up our cross, too. We must be as Frodo was, shunning the power of the ring, and willingly destroying it, for the greater good. We must live with utter humility, following Jesus's pattern, because that destroys evil more effectively than confrontation ever will.

There are depths to this passage that I cannot explore in a ten minute talk. I hope I have left you pondering on the riddle of Jesus's humility and submission as the only countermeasure to sin's desire for power. And perhaps we have seen why Peter warranted such a stern warning, too.

Father God, we seek power, but we also seek your way; we often seek to do good but find our actions compromised; we want to be on your victorious side, but want to do it on our terms. Help us to take up our cross and follow you, confident in *your* grace, *your* power, and *your* victory. Amen.