



THE KING'S CONFESSION

Mark 14:53-72

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On Sunday, February 2, 2014, Christ Church Jerusalem (CCJ) celebrated the 150th anniversary of their church plant in Baghdad, St. George's. The guest preacher at CCJ that day was Canon Andrew White, pastor of St. George's and "the Vicar of Baghdad." During his sermon, Canon White said that people often tell him to 'take care' in Baghdad. "It is difficult to do that where I am," he said. "I have been held at gunpoint, kidnapped, thrown into a cell with chopped-off toes and fingers all over the floor, and shot at countless times. In Baghdad, I don't take care—I take risks." He went on to talk about the courage of those who left CCJ for Baghdad in 1864. They didn't take care, they took risks. He also spoke of the courage of those who remained behind and supported them (which is often the harder thing to do). Finally, he challenged us in the same way, saying, "*Don't* take care." The kingdom of God has spread all around the world because God's people have chosen *not* to be safe. Then David Pileggi, the Rector of CCJ, read from Psalm 95, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts," and asked, "What is God saying to you today?"

Mark 14:53-72 shines a spotlight on the courage of Jesus, whose brave confession of faith before the Jewish ruling council got him killed. It also tells an opposite story, not in the spotlight but off in the shadows. It's a bit like watching a middle school play: the action is on center stage, or at least it's supposed to be, but there's also a lot of noise and commotion going on behind the curtains. Off in the shadows, Peter is the anti-hero, as he loses his nerve and denies the Lord. Peter had the good sense to take care. Thank God Jesus didn't.

There's little doubt that Mark 14:53-72 is historical. It has been passed down to us by multiple witnesses, and it's absurd to think that the embarrassing details of Peter's story would have been fabricated. So this is historical, but we mustn't think of it as *only* a history lesson. It's much, much more. It's also a snapshot of our own moment, as we like Peter stand at the same fork in the road. At the crossroads of faith, we must choose whether to follow the Lord, or to follow the crowd. No matter whether you're a lifelong Christian believer, or you're brand new to matters of religion and faith, we all routinely find ourselves at the same crossroads and we must choose which way to go. Will we join Peter in taking care? Or will we risk everything to follow Jesus to the cross, and through it, resurrection life?

AT THE CROSSROADS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Learning *not* to take care, but instead to take risks as God's people, is right at the heart of the Gospel. Before we look at Mark 14, let's reflect on what's already happened in the story so that we can see what's at stake for Peter—and all of us—at the crossroads.

When God created the world, he made us in his image, and he appointed us to serve as his assistants, to rule benevolently over all creation under his kingly authority. But then we fell into sin, and our whole world was turned upside down. The serpent tempted us to rise up and become equal with God. But it was a trick. Instead of becoming gods, we came under the authority of the serpent. No longer reflecting the image of God in the world, we began behaving like animals. We became cautious and self-protective, rather than joyful ambassadors of God. Consequently, the earth was filled with the knowledge of the glory of the wicked, selfish serpent, rather than the glory of the Lord.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus comes to turn the world right-side up again. In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus met a man who was so wracked by sin and evil that he didn't hardly look like a man at all. He was chained among the tombs, but he constantly broke out of his chains because he was more animal than man. But then Jesus found him and healed him, driving out his demons into a herd of swine. Jesus restored him to the image of God, and then recommissioned him to be his ambassador in the Decapolis, benevolently ruling there as God's under-secretary.

Likewise, when we put our faith in Jesus, he restores our humanity. He turns our world right-side up again, by freeing us of Satan's power, and making us fully human again. He restores us to our rightful place under God's dominion. He recommissions us to be his ambassadors in the world. No longer cautious and self-protective, we take risks for God's kingdom, for the life of the world, so that some day the whole world might be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

There's a problem, however. God's kingdom is still unfolding. We don't see it everywhere. We still must walk by faith and not by sight. Consequently, we often find ourselves at the crossroads, struggling to decide whether to step out in faith or to turn aside to the safety of our old master.

Mark tells the story, in chapter 8, of how Peter once found himself at such a turning point. Jesus had called Peter and the others to "be with him" (Mark 3:14) and to join him "on the way" (8:3, 27; 9:34; 10:32). Jesus had told them what to expect upon arrival in Jerusalem, that he would "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). But Peter got out in front of Jesus and rebuked him, saying, "No Jesus. That's the wrong way to do it. You've got to take care and not take risks. Let me lead you and I'll show you a better way." Then Jesus sternly rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan. For you aren't setting your mind on things of God, but on the things of man." (8:33)

Imagine how shocking and hurtful this must have been to Peter, who surely felt that he was only trying to be of help to Jesus. But Jesus wasn't trying to be unkind. He was, rather, taking Peter back to the beginning of time, and reminding Peter of what happened then, when humanity first

fell into sin. Peter had fallen into the same trap as Adam and Eve, by taking orders from the serpent rather than falling in line behind the Lord.

Jesus then called everyone together at the crossroads and said,

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:34-36 ESV)

The decision *not* to take care, but instead to take risks as God’s people, is right at the heart of the Gospel. Do you see the fork in the road? There’s one path going up, which looks to be safe, because it appears to be a way of great success and prosperity. It’s the way that seems right, and the way that most everyone chooses. But it’s not the path that Jesus is on. If we choose the upward path, we’ll be joined by the crowds, but we’ll have to go it alone. We’ll end up behaving like animals, always self-protective, never taking risks. The alternative way is down, and it’s the path that Jesus is on. It looks scary, because it’s risky. It involves picking up our own crosses. But it’s the way of sweet communion with the Lord. He promises to be with us in the way, and to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death into green pastures and everlasting life.

PETER’S RETURN TO THE CROSSROADS

Peter returned to the crossroads in Mark 14. Earlier that evening, during the last supper, Peter had sworn confidently that when he came to the fork in the road, he would choose the right path, no matter what. He said: *“Even though they all fall away, I will not”* (14:29).

After supper, they went to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was greatly distressed and troubled, but Peter remained confident. Peter was so confident that he fell asleep and remained asleep despite Jesus’ repeated calls for help. Unlike Peter, Jesus needed to pray against temptation. Peter—like so many of us—was too strong to pray.

When Judas came with his posse, Peter took care. Everyone ran away, including Peter (14:50). *“Even though they all fall away,”* Peter had said, *“I will not.”* But he did. Jesus continued on the risky path, the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, but Peter took care and stayed behind. Peter had fallen asleep when Jesus needed him to stay awake and keep watch. When the serpent returned to the garden, Peter was asleep and caught off-guard. All he could do was hide in the bushes and hope to remain unseen. He wasn’t sleepy any more. Now he was wide-awake and keeping watch, but it was too late.

As they led Jesus away, Peter crept out to follow the Lord at a safe distance. Can’t you just hear him saying to himself, *“There’s no problem. I’m still following the Lord”*? Jesus, however, had appointed Peter and the other disciples to *“be with him”* (3:14). That’s what the Twelve had been doing over the past few years, until the arrest in the garden. Peter followed at a safe distance as Jesus was led inside the High Priest’s palace. Then he remained out in the courtyard, not *“with Jesus,”* but *“with the guards”* (14:54) keeping warm by the fire.

Over and over again, Peter had professed faith in Jesus, having sworn allegiance to Jesus many times. Now he was a backslider. He was taking care, keeping watch, not for the sake of obeying and serving the Lord, but in order to look out for number one and make sure he ended up on the winning side. Peter had given up on following Jesus. His animal instincts had taken over, calling him to self-rule and self-preservation. To Peter, and to all of us who make similar choices all the time, it feels like we're still standing at the crossroads, still neutral, trying to decide which way to go. But if you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.¹ At the end of the day, there's no difference between agnosticism and unbelief. There's either following the Lord, or there's self-rule. Peter had chosen the latter. Peter was taking care.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT, JESUS TAKES A RISK

The Sanhedrin weren't interested in giving Jesus a fair trial. They wouldn't settle for anything less than a death sentence:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. (Mark 14:55 ESV)

It's a bitter irony that the religious leaders of Israel, whose life mission involved upholding and adhering to the Ten Commandments, were determined to break the Law through bearing false witness. Why? Just so they wouldn't break the Law with regard to murder. Yet try as they might, they couldn't get their false witnesses to agree. So the high priest put Jesus on the stand, asking:

"Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But he remained silent and made no answer. (Mark 14:60-61 ESV)

Why should Jesus answer a kangaroo court? They had no authority over him. So the high priest tried a different approach, this time asking (14:61), *"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"*

This time Jesus said (14:62), ἐγώ εἰμι, *"I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."*

Why did Jesus answer the high priest this time? Because this question went straight to the heart not only of Jesus' *identity*, but also his *authority*. Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the Blessed: he was the Christ, i.e. the one *anointed* by God for kingship; and he was the Son of God, i.e. under God's authority rather than the Sanhedrin's. Thus, Jesus was God's man, God's under-secretary, God's vice-regent, come to rule under God's authority and expand God's kingdom. Because he was under God's authority, he had the right to take authority over the corrupt and apostate Jewish ruling council. Quoting from Daniel 7 (cf. 13:26), Jesus again foretold the demise of every false and wicked authority and the in-breaking of God's Kingdom. That's what Jesus meant by his answer, and that's why the high priest became so furiously angry. Jesus was saying that the old regime was coming to an end, and Jesus would soon rule in their stead. He was the one who was seated at God's right hand, to whom all authority in heaven and earth was about to be given.

¹ Rush, "Freewill," *Permanent Waves* (1980).

Jesus had previously taught his disciples not to worry about what they would say when they stood before judges and magistrates, because the Holy Spirit would supply their words. Now he modeled this, as the Holy Spirit spoke a true word through him. It was a courageous, risky thing to say to ruthless, wicked leaders, because it was a message of judgment. The Sanhedrin were not part of God's kingdom, and their corrupt and wicked administration was about to come to an end. Jesus was a conduit of God's truth, speaking truth to power, and trusting that God would somehow vindicate him.

The High Priest was furious, of course. In 14:63 he tore his robes, once again revealing his ignorance of the Law, since the High Priest was forbidden from tearing his clothes (Lev 21:10). Then in 14:64 he accused Jesus of blasphemy. This, too, is ironic, since the problem wasn't Jesus' lack of reverence for God. Rather, it was Jesus' lack of reverence for the Sanhedrin. Ultimately, Jesus' disdain for the Sanhedrin is what the whole trial was about. It wasn't blasphemy against God that they were concerned about. Rather, it was blasphemy against their regime. Jesus had spoken truth to power, challenging the corruption of the Sanhedrin, and they were determined to murder him for it.

In Mark 14:63, the high priest asked, "Why do we still need witnesses?" Turning to the rest of the council he called for a decision, and they unanimously agreed that Jesus should die. Jesus had spoken the truth, but false witnesses before a corrupt leader were able to bring about the false verdict that they had intended. They handed Jesus back over to the guards, who "received him with blows" (14:65).

IN THE SHADOWS, PETER TAKES CARE

With the reference to the guards in 14:65, Mark transitions back to Peter. Remember that Jesus had appointed Peter to "be with him" (3:14), but when Jesus was arrested, Peter took care and chose (14:54) to be "with the guards" instead.

Jesus knew things would turn out this way. Earlier that evening, when Peter swore he wouldn't fall away, Jesus warned him, saying:

"Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."

But [Peter] said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." (Mark 14:29-31 ESV)

Yet Peter couldn't keep his promise. While Jesus took the risk, Peter took care. Mark 14:66-72 is Peter's final scene in Mark's Gospel, and the contrast between Peter and Jesus couldn't be more vivid: Jesus was inside, surrounded by false witnesses, and the Holy Spirit empowered him to speak a true word before the authorities. Peter, on the other hand, was outside, surrounded by true witnesses, where he carefully countered everything they said with falsehoods. Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin because he spoke the truth. Peter, however, was condemned by his own words, calling down curses upon himself as he swore off any knowledge of Jesus.

Let's take a closer look at Peter's three denials, to see how his faith came unraveled as he fell back under the dominion of the serpent. In 14:67, Peter's first denial reveals him to be playing it safe, still standing at the crossroads. The servant girl accused him of doing what Jesus had appointed him to do, i.e. being *with* Jesus. Peter denied it, saying, "I don't what you're talking about." Hear the agnosticism in Peter's response. He was saying, "I don't understand—I'm agnostic." Yet everything was happening precisely as Jesus had told him only a few hours earlier. What else was there to understand?

In 14:69, Peter's second denial was a kind of personal ex-communication. At the gate, the servant girl said to the bystanders, "This one is *with* them." But again Peter denied it, and in so doing, distanced himself from Jesus' people, the disciples, the church—that band of Jesus-followers with whom Peter had traveled and prayed and ministered throughout Israel. And he was absolutely right in saying so, because he wasn't with them. He had sworn that he would stick with Jesus even if the rest of the disciples fell away. But as it turned out, Peter took care by hanging out *with* the guards.

Finally, Peter denied the Lord in 14:70, when one of the bystanders said to him, "Truly you were with them, for you are a Galilean." But *Peter began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak."* (Mark 14:71 ESV). Peter's response was total overkill, but it shows the progression of his apostasy. The bystander hadn't said anything about Jesus, but Peter lost his cool and blew his cover, saying, "I don't know Jesus." This, of course, is true. Peter truly *didn't* know Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed. He had fallen back under the dominion of the serpent instead.

CONCLUSION

We come now to the end of Peter's story in the Gospel of Mark. Inasmuch as Peter represents us as "every man" in this story, it's a very discouraging and sad story, isn't it? If the Apostle Peter couldn't watch and pray, then how could we? If Jesus' dear friend Peter couldn't choose to follow Jesus to the cross, then how could we?

These are important questions, and I believe that they are the very questions Mark wanted his readers to consider. Tradition has it that Mark was Peter's secretary, and he wrote this Gospel in Rome right around the time of the first great persecution of the church under Nero. Thus, Mark probably wrote at the crossroads for readers at the crossroads. I believe that he wanted us to ponder whether it's even possible to follow Jesus at the crossroads. Or are we doomed always to take care and play it safe?

Without question, we are called to take risks for the Kingdom of God. At Pentecost, the Lord empowered us to do so. At Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the church. Those of us who are Christians have what Peter lacked at the crossroads. We have what enabled Jesus to speak truth to power before the Sanhedrin. We have what Peter needed as he kept warm by the fire.

Thankfully, Mark 14:66-72 is not the end of the story for Peter. Already in 14:72 we see a glimpse of the change that began in Peter.

And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:72 ESV)

In 13:35, Jesus had spoken a parable, saying that the servants wouldn't know when the master of the house would return. Would it be in the first, second, third or fourth watches of the night, i.e. early evening, midnight, cockcrow, or dawn? Peter denied the Lord for the third time at cockcrow, the third watch of the night. The Master of the House had returned. He was standing at the door and knocking. Just as Jesus had foretold, Peter had indeed denied him three times. So Peter remembered, and he wept. This is the first step in returning to the Lord. Peter's grief and sorrow for his sin shows a softening of his heart in moving towards repentance. Is God calling you to repentance as well?

Later, after the resurrection, Jesus would appear to Peter and reinstate him by asking three times if Peter loved him. Then on Pentecost, Peter received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he became a courageous ambassador of the Lord.

What about you? Is the Master of the House standing at the door and knocking? It's not too late to return to him. He will receive you, and restore you, and fill you with his Holy Spirit. I want to assure you of God's abundant grace and mercy for all those who return to him in repentance and faith.

How do you want to be remembered? As one who survived by taking care of number one, through shifting allegiances and sticking with the crowd? As someone who took care? Perhaps God is calling you to follow Jesus in some difficult assignment, to testify and confess your faith in him in the face of opposition. Will you take care, or will you take the risk? Maybe you're a student, and your classmates don't believe in Jesus. Will you allow the Holy Spirit to speak to them through you? Perhaps there's a broken relationship in your life, with a friend or relative, and God is calling you to take a risk by taking the initiative. Where will the Master of the House find you at cockcrow? Will you be playing it safe, or will you choose to be with him on the way of the Lord?

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. What is God saying to you today?