

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

He Began To Teach Them

Today's Gospel is the hinge of St Mark's whole work. He uses the word *began* in a very noticeable way: this is the moment when *Jesus began to teach his disciples*: about what? About his vocation to suffer, about the Cross.

Cross-bearing: a career for life

We use the word *cross* fairly glibly, to mean the little bundle of sufferings we each have to bear. This familiarity protects us from the particular shudder which the word ought to provoke. Announcing the Cross isn't simply a way for Jesus to refer to *his* difficulties in life. It is the devastating annunciation of a future which those he was teaching must face with him. Three times Jesus solemnly says that his career is directed towards crucifixion; and in today's first instance, he insists that this destiny is unquestionable, unalterable. *If you refuse to understand this*, he seems to say, *you won't understand me*. This should alert us to the fact that the Cross is the place where the secret of Jesus lies hidden. Crucifixion may be the same thing as a curse, the furthest place of condemnation, and the extreme example of failure. Yet it hides the ultimate truth about God and us, the key to the earth and the heavens. Don't seek for the heart of Christ in a code of behaviour, or a set of prayers, or a series of poetic stories, or the picture of a good shepherd, or any other of the images he used for his life and being, *unless you use these things to illuminate the Cross* – that is the heart of all meaning.

“You Are The Christ!”

The word *Christ* also needs explaining. In direct simple terms it just means someone anointed; and this could mean that he had physically had oil poured on him (like a king at his coronation, or a priest at his ordination) or that in some spiritual sense he had been chosen for some special task (like a prophet seized-on by the Spirit). In either case, the *Christ* (in Hebrew *Messiah*) would be a person with a destiny from God, a person charged with special grace for a special purpose. God is not restricted in his choice: the book of Isaiah is quite ready to recognize pagans as *Messiah*; so the Persian king who conquers the Assyrians and brings the Exile to an end is called *God's Messiah*, though the prophet is well aware that he has no knowledge of God. So when Peter speaks up, and says to Jesus, *You are the Christ*, he says

something that is deeply true; but when Jesus begins to explain the destiny of the Christ (to suffer crucifixion), Peter is horrified. He has the words right, but he is not prepared for the true meaning of them. This is the weight of the word *began*; Jesus taught them the word, but the meaning would take a lot more learning.

What about us?

We have the privilege of watching this process from afar. We have, naturally, sorted it all out in our minds over twenty centuries. We make Peter and the others look stupid, with our theological insight and understanding. How could they have been so slow? Yet how do we perform, when the Cross actually comes crashing down onto our shoulders, violent, sudden, inhuman, brutal: condemning, shaming, wounding and killing all our humanity and trust? That veneer of acceptance, that spirit of prayer and sacrifice, can be shown to be terribly thin, when the true Cross, shorn of its halo and gold decoration, comes to claim our obedience. How many people, who have recited the Creed fluently and piously, purse their lips when the Cross comes, and self-righteously question God, as if they had never been told that life could be so vulnerable, so painful, or so sacrificial? Like Peter, they say: *This should not, must not happen*. Unfortunately, they too must bear Jesus' rebuke: *Get behind me, Satan: you are thinking man's thoughts, but not God's*. We have a long way to go as disciples. May Jesus begin to teach us too! *Fr Philip*