Weak Faith, Strong Saviour
Mark 9:2-29

I don't know if you saw, but this week Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Office of Meta, Facebook's parent company, announced she'll be leaving the company. And in her resignation announcement, on Facebook, of course, she wrote, "It is time for me to write the next chapter of my life." It's an appealing idea, isn't it? - that we're the authors of our own destinies.

But what happens when your life doesn't run to the script you've written for it?

Well, we're looking at the passage that was read to us earlier. But to understand it, you've got to remember what went before. Jesus asked his disciples "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter replies, "You're the Christ", you're the Messiah.

But he's got a whole load of assumptions as to what that means: that Jesus is the one who's going to lead them to victory against their political, military, flesh and blood enemies. Peter has written the next chapter of Jesus', and with it his life.

But immediately Jesus turns that expectation on its head. Because instead, Jesus says, he's going to suffer and die. None of which features in Peter's script. So Peter rebukes Jesus, which leads to Jesus rebuking Peter.

But where does that leave Peter and the others? Because suffering and death, and denying yourself and taking up your cross, isn't exactly what they signed up for, is it? It doesn't sound much like power and triumph and living your best life now, does it?

And their understanding and expectation of what it meant to be the Messiah, and of God's plans and purposes for their own lives are being shaken.

And yet, that's not such an alien experience, is it? Life isn't going the way you had planned out. That relationship you thought was *the one* is broken. The job you wanted, you didn't get, or you did, but it hasn't worked out. Life has thrown up stuff that, frankly, you don't like. And like Peter and the others, life can begin to look like something you didn't sign up for.

Or, it's worse than that. It's not just that you face disappointment, there are also times when you have to watch as someone or something you love disintegrates.

What do you need when life's like that? When it's not going to script. What can give you hope in disappointment and bring order out of chaos?

Future Hope
Have you ever seen someone's mask slip, just for a moment, and you see what they're really like? Maybe it's a flash of anger, or a racist comment and it's gone in a moment, but in that moment you've seen a glimpse of what they're really like.

It's a recurring motif in fiction, isn't it? In CS Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, the Lady of the Green Kirtle has imprisoned Puddleglum and the children. And on the surface she appears an attentive, generous host, as she seeks to persuade them that Aslan, and Narnia, and even the sun, don't really exist. And

they're in danger of falling for her inchantments. But in a moment of bravery, Puddleglum breaks the spell. And in that moment, it's not just the lady's sweet attitude that changes, she changes, physically, into a great coiling, crushing snake, as she's revealed for who she really is.

Or, think of Gandalf the Grey in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, returning as Gandalf the White, come to rescue the besieged forces at Helms Deep. And it's his change in appearance that tells you who he is.

But of course, Tolkien based Gandalf's transformation on Christ's transfiguration here in Mark. So, if he based that on this, what story in ancient literature did Mark borrow from for his account ? And the answer is, nothing. There is no equivalent in the ancient literature of what happens here to Jesus. This is unique.

And Mark tells us it happened, v2, on 'a high mountain'. Which should immediately alert you to what's going on, because in the Old Testament two men, who just happen to be Moses and Elijah, encounter God in his glory on a high mountain.

And Mark tells us, v2-3, that on this mountain, Jesus 'was transfigured before them [the three disciples], and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.'

And Mark's gospel is almost certainly based on Peter's memoirs. And you can imagine Peter saying, 'Man, his clothes! I have *never* seen anything that white.' Because when Mark says his clothes were *radiant* he uses a word for shining, glittering, gleaming - almost as if they are scattering rays of light. And it's as if Peter struggling to find the words to describe what he saw, because what do you compare something to when there is no comparison? As he writes himself in his second letter, 'We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.' (2 Pet 1:16).

But that's not all they saw. Verse 4, 'And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.' Moses who, after Israel's rebellion and near disintegration, encountered God on a mountain. And Elijah who, after his victory against the prophets of Baal, sank into a pit of despair, and encountered God on a mountain. Both men who knew first hand about suffering, and for whom life was not going according to script.

But John Chrysostum, the great 4th Century preacher, gave another reason why these two appear. 'Both had withstood a tyrant' and delivered their people - Moses against Pharoah, Elijah against Jezebel - just as Christ will face down the tyranny of satan.

And so, both these men had ultimately been pointing forward to the man they're now talking to. And in Jewish thought, Elijah was expected to reappear before the Great and Final Day of the Lord. And a prophet like Moses might arise to usher in that Day. And here they both are, talking to Jesus.

Which explains why Peter says what he says: v5, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Because there was also an expectation that before the End finally came there would be one final Feast of Tabernacles, to celebrate Israel living in tents, with God in their midst, before entering the ultimate, final, Promised Land. And if Messiah is here, and Moses and Elijah are here, it must be time to put up those tents.

But before Peter can start building, he's cut off, v7, 'And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."'

And in the Old Testament, cloud came down on Mount Sinai, and a cloud lead the people through the desert, both as a symbol of God's divine presence. And when Jesus has asked the disciples, 'Who do you say I am?', Peter replied: You're the Messiah. Well, here, we get God the Father's response: This is my Son.

And with that, Moses and Elijah are gone: v8, 'And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them *but Jesus only*.' Because great as Moses and Elijah were, they're servants, only Jesus is the Son.

But why all this now? Why the glory? And why the words, 'Listen to him'?

Because Jesus has just told them he must suffer, and they must suffer. That he's going to die and they must deny themselves. Because they're going to watch him be crucified and he tells them to take up their cross.

Why listen to that? Why trust him? Why trust him when things aren't going according to the script you've written? Why stay loyal when things are happening you didn't sign up for?

Because this is who he is. This is whose hands you're in. And to be in the hands of one so glorious would be terrible, if he was not so good.

And when Jesus is transformed before them, it's not his nature that changes - it's his outward appearance that changes to fit his true nature. And for just a moment the curtain is drawn back, and they see his eternal glory. As Psalm 104 says, 'O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendour and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment.' So, when, later, they watch his body ripped apart by the scourge, and hung on a cross, they know: this is whose body it is - God's glorious and beloved Son.

And it's knowing that, that this is who he was, and is, and ever will be, that after suffering this is what lies on the other side, the hope of glory, the promise of what will be, it's that that can give you courage to face the suffering. As Augustine wrote: 'As the sun is to our eyes, so Christ is to our hearts.' You look up and feel the sun's warmth on your face, so look up at Christ, in his glory, and let him warm your heart. This is who holds you in his hands.

But that doesn't mean the present is any less real.

Present Reality

How easy do you find it to keep a secret? Imagine you're planning a surprise party for someone, and you just want to talk to them about it! It's so much easier when finally you can! Well, on their way down, Mark says, v9, Jesus 'charged them to tell no one what they had seen, *until the Son of Man had risen from the dead*.' Why not until then? Because they, and everyone else, will only properly understand what they've just witnessed *after* his death and resurrection. Talking about it before will only feed their triumphalism. And what Jesus is making clear is that, in the purposes of God, suffering precedes glory.

But the disciples doubt that. Verse 11, 'They asked him, [then] "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" 'I mean Jesus, the scribes talk about the prophet Malachi: "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Mal 4:5-6) And that doesn't sound much like suffering. In fact, that sounds a lot like God breaking in and making everything right.' Subtext: Jesus, God has better plans for you and us than suffering.

And Jesus replies, v12, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. *And how is it written* of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt."

How is it written. In other words, the Bible's got more to say on what's to come than just Elijah. Like Isaiah 53 and the Servant of the Lord who will be despised and rejected, smitten and afflicted, pierced and crushed. Or Zechariah 12 and the One who is pierced, whose death is mourned as that of a beloved only child.

Will God break in and make every thing right? Is there glory up ahead? Yes! But something comes first. Suffering precedes glory.

And not just the Messiah. Verse 13, "But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased." Because Herdod and his lover, Herodias, did to John the Baptist - standing in Elijah's shoes - what Jezebel had failed to do to Elijah, and that's kill him.

And yet, the disciples didn't need to look back to John to know the reality of suffering, did they - they just had to come off the mountain and walk down to the valley. Because on the mountain there was radiant light. Down in the valley there is darkness. On the mountain, God's Son stands in glory; down in the valley another son writhes on the ground. On the mountain Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus; down in the valley scribes argue with his disciples. On the mountain Jesus is revealed in the power of his true nature. Down in the valley the disciples are revealed in the weakness of their nature. On the mountain God the Father speaks words of love and declaration over his Son. Down in the valley another father speaks over his son, words of fear and desperation.

But that's the point of mountain top experiences, whether Moses on Sinai, or Elijah on Horeb, or Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, it's to prepare them for the reality and the battle of the valley below.

Verse 14, 'And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them.' And it's not hard to guess what they were arguing about, is it? Their allegiance to Jesus and their failure to cast out this demon.

Ever experienced something similar?

Maybe you've faced criticism for your faith, or for your personal failures, or, like here, for both. It can have a demoralising effect, can't it? It's the present reality of the valley.

But what the disciples are experiencing is nothing in comparison to what the father and the boy are experiencing. Jesus asks, v16, "What are you arguing about?" And before anyone else can answer, v17, 'Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit…" And, v18, "I asked your disciples to cast it out, *and they were not able*."

The life of another beloved son is being destroyed, and everyone seems powerless to do anything about it. And again, maybe you know what that feels like. Someone you love, or some relationship you care about, is disintegrating and nothing you, or anyone else does makes any difference. Or maybe, like this Father, you've asked for help and been let down. That too is the reality of the valley.

But look what happens next. Verse 20, 'They brought the boy to [Jesus]. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.' Jesus comes on the scene, the problem is laid right in front of him, and all hell breaks loose. God is right there, and things look like they're getting worse rather than better. That too is the reality of the valley - where suffering precedes glory.

But none of us want to stay in the valley, do we? So how can we bring future hope to bear in the valley, in the present reality of suffering?

The Bridge Between Two Worlds

And with the boy convulsing in front of him, Jesus asks the father: v21, "How long has this been happening to him?" It's Jesus giving him permission to tell his story as he recounts the countless times his son has been thrown into fire and water. And the untold story behind it of how many times he and his wife have had to pull him out.

And the father's desperate. Desperate for his son, but also desperately trying to hold on to faith. Verse 22, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

If you can do anything… It's not surprising he's doubting, is it, having just witnessed the disciples' inability to do anything.

Verse 23, 'And Jesus said to him, "'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes."' You see, it's not that Jesus might possibly be able to do something and help a little, it's that he can do everything. He knows all things are possible. He knows glory is coming. He has no doubt about God's power.

But does the father? And with his boy writhing at his feet, Jesus is challenging this man to trust him: 'I know you have lived with this for years. I know the times you have rescued him and held him. I know the pain and the grief you experience every single day, but now trust me. Trust me that I'm the one who can do all things.'

And verse 24, 'Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief."' He's beautifully honest, isn't he. And does Jesus tell him, 'no, that's not good enough, you need to have more faith. Come back when you *really* believe'? No. Verse 25, 'He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And the boy is convulsed, and looks as if he's died, before Jesus takes him by the hand, lifts him up, and gives him back to his father, healed.

That's whose hands you're in. That's whose hands you're in when you're facing criticism for your faith or your failures. That's whose hands you're in when the path the Lord calls you to walk is hard. That's whose hands you're in when what or whom you love is disintegrating.

And it's not the size of the man's faith Jesus is interested in, it's the object of his faith. It's who he's putting his faith in. And his faith may be small, and it may be faltering, and he may be clinging on by his finger tips, but he looks at Jesus and trusts him. 'Help my unbelief' - because he knows he can't help himself, but Jesus can.

And that's the bridge between the suffering of now and the glory to come. That's what'll give you peace and poise in the valley and the strength to hold on. You see, afterwards, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him v28, "Why could we not cast it out?"

I mean, Jesus had given them authority to do exactly this sort of thing, and they'd done it in the past, so why not now?

Failure can be a humbling but powerful learning experience, can't it?

And Jesus tells them, v29, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." You see, Jesus could say to the demon, 'I command you', because his authority lies in himself. But the authority of the disciples is delegated authority. And most likely, they've become self-confident. Their previous success has left them thinking 'we can do this!' But they can't. Not on their own. And prayer is faith verbalised: 'God, I can't do this, but you can. I believe, but help my unbelief.'

And down here, we're in the valley, so we look up to Christ and trust him. That whatever we're going through, we're in his glorious and good hands. His nail-pierced hands. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone' (Heb 2:9).

And here, the One who shines like the sun will suffer. Like this boy, he too will be thrown to the ground, to be nailed to a cross. And he'll do it for us, for all those times we haven't believed. And as he suffers, the sun will be blotted out and he'll enter the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, so that you and I can be brought out into the sunshine of his glory.

That's why you can trust him. And as you do, and fix your eyes on him, it'll change you. As Paul writes, 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor 3:18).

In other words, as you look on him you become like him. Like he is to this father, you'll become more compassionate and merciful to the suffering, because you know he's been compassionate and merciful to you. You'll find yourself more stable in the midst of suffering, because you know he suffered for you, which means he loves you and has a purpose for what you're going through. And you'll be willing to take your stand against darkness when you confront it because you know he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world, and whatever hell breaks loose, glory lies up ahead.