

Historic Commentary



(Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 8:27-38 from Selected Ancient Commentators

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 8](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Venerable Bede](#): We note that the Lord called himself “Son of man,” while Nathanael proclaimed him “Son of God.” Similarly is the account in the Gospels where Jesus himself asks the disciples who people say the Son of man is, and Peter answers, “You are the Christ, Son of the living God.” This was done under the guidance of the economy of righteousness. It shows that the two natures of the one mediator are affirmed: his divinity and his humanity, and attested both by our Lord himself and by human mouths. By this means the God-man declared the weakness of the humanity assumed by him. Those purely human would themselves declare the power of eternal divinity in him.

[Venerable Bede](#): “Messiah” in the Hebrew language means “Christ” in Greek; in Latin it is interpreted as “the Anointed One.” Hence “chrisma” in Greek means “anointing” in Latin. The Lord is named Christ, that is, the Anointed One, because, as Peter says, “God has anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power.” Hence the Psalmist also speaks in his praise, “God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions.” He calls us his companions since we have also been fully anointed with visible chrism for the reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit in baptism, and we are called “Christians” from Christ’s name.

[Augustine](#): How hard and painful does this appear! The Lord has required that “whoever will come after him must deny himself.” But what he commands is neither hard nor painful when he himself helps us in such a way so that the very thing he requires may be accomplished... For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy.

[Caesarius of Arles](#): What he commands is not difficult, since he helps to effect what he commands... Just as we are lost through loving ourselves, so we are found by denying ourselves. Love of self was the ruin of the first man. If he had not loved himself in the wrong order, he would have been willing to be subject to God, preferring God to self.

[Tertullian](#): “Your cross” means your own anxieties and your sufferings in your own body, which itself is shaped in a way already like a cross.

Caesarius of Arles: What does this mean, “take up a cross”? It means he will bear with whatever is troublesome, and in this very act he will be following me. When he has begun to follow me according to my teaching and precepts, he will find many people contradicting him and standing in his way, many who not only deride but even persecute him. Moreover, this is true, not only of pagans who are outside the church, but also of those who seem to be in it visibly, but are outside of it because of the perversity of their deeds. Although these glory in merely the title of Christian, they continually persecute faithful Christians. Such belong to the members of the church in the same way that bad blood is in the body. Therefore, if you wish to follow Christ, do not delay in carrying his cross; tolerate sinners, but do not yield to them. Do not let the false happiness of the wicked corrupt you. You do well to despise all things for the sake of Christ, in order that you may be fit for his companionship.

Augustine: Turn, rather, to these teachings, my very dear friend: take up your cross and follow the Lord. For, when I noticed that you were being slowed down in your divine purpose by your preoccupation with domestic cares, I felt that you were being carried and dragged along by your cross rather than that you were carrying it. What else does the cross mean than the mortality of this flesh? This is our very own cross which the Lord commands us to carry that we may be as well armed as possible in following him. We suffer momentarily until death is swallowed up in victory. Then this cross itself will be crucified. The cross will be nailed to the fear of God. We would hardly be able to carry it now if it forever resisted us with free and unfettered limbs. There is no other way for you to follow the Lord except by carrying it, for how can you follow him if you are not his?

Augustine: This precept by which we are enjoined to lose our life does not mean that a person should kill himself, which would be an unforgivable crime, but it does mean that one should kill that in oneself which is unduly attached to the earthly, which makes one take inordinate pleasure in this present life to the neglect of the life to come. This is the meaning of “shall hate his life” and “shall lose it.” Embedded in the same admonition, he speaks most openly of the profit of gaining one’s life when he says: “He that loses his life in this world shall find it unto life eternal.”

Clement of Alexandria: Those who neglect good works may fail to grasp just how much the good work of God has benefited them. Hence they are less capable of praying fittingly so as to receive good things from God. And even if they receive them, they will likely be unaware of what has been given them. And even if they enjoy them, they will not enjoy worthily what they have not understood. For from their lack of knowledge they will not grasp how to use the good things given them. And from their impulsiveness they will remain ignorant of how to avail themselves of the divine gifts offered.

Caesarius of Arles: While there is much in the world to love, it is best loved in relation to the One who made it. The world is beautiful, but much fairer is the One who fashioned it. The world is glorious, but more delightful is the One by whom the world was established. Therefore, let us labor as much as we can, beloved, that love of the world as such may not overwhelm us, and that we may not love the creature more than the creator. God has given us earthly possessions in order that we may love him with our whole heart and soul.

But sometimes we provoke God's displeasure against us when we love his gifts more than God himself. The same thing happens in human relationships. Suppose someone gives a special gift to his protégé. But the protégé then begins to despise the giver, and loves the gift more than the one who gave. Suppose he comes to think of the giver no longer as friend but enemy. Just so it is with our relationship with God. We love more those who love us for ourselves rather than our gifts. So God is known to love those who love him more than the earthly gifts he gives.

Tertullian: The faithful are not ashamed that the Son of God was crucified. Hence they are shameless in a good sense through their contempt of shame, and foolish in a happy sense. The crucifixion was indeed a shameful event, viewed humanly. Yes, the Son of God died! This is to be believed precisely amid its being an offense to humanity. The Son was buried! He rose from the dead! This fact is made all the more poignant by seeming all the more absurd. But how could any of this be true if he himself was not truly the One he made himself known to be? If I avoid suffering, I am ashamed to confess: "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for my name's sake." Unhappy, therefore, are they who, by running away, refuse to suffer as God at times requires. "He who shall endure to the end shall be saved." How then, when you ask me to flee, would I be enduring to the end?

Cyril of Alexandria: He who as God was beyond suffering, suffered in his own flesh as a human being. When he became flesh, being God, he did not in any way cease to be God. Precisely as he entered into the created order, he remained above creation. He remained as giver of the law when he came to serve "under the law." He retained the inviolable divine dignity precisely when he took on "the form of a slave." It was precisely as only begotten Son that he became "the firstborn among many brothers," while still remaining the only begotten. So why should it seem so strange that he should suffer in the flesh according to his humanity, even while transcending suffering according to his divinity? Thus the ever astute Paul says that the Word himself who is "in the form of God" and equal to God the Father "became obedient even unto death, death of the cross."

Gregory of Nyssa: The Son does not divide the glory with the Father, but receives the glory of the Father in its entirety, even as the Father receives all the glory of the Son.