

Mark 1:29-39 ~ The essence of discipleship

The last week we noted that the proclamation of the arrival of the Kingdom of God is central to “the good news about Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God”.¹

We have also noted that Mark, Peter’s interpreter, saw this very much in terms of a confrontation with the powers that hold God humanity in their grip. For Mark, Jesus’ mission was a struggle to the death, to set us free from bondage to “the strong man”, as he puts it.²

Again, in Mark’s scheme of things, a decisive time has come. There is a sense of urgency as both God’s judgement as well as deliverance from evil, approaches. God’s people are called to turn away from their lax ways and believe in this “good news”, in order to become part of God’s liberating work as followers of Jesus.

So these three themes already set up by Mark are carried further in today’s reading:

- discipleship as participation
- power ministry’ and prayer
- the content and object of Jesus’ mission’.

Today I want to look at just the first two of these leaving the third to next week when the reading will extend our theme further.

¹ Mk.1:1, 11, 14-15

² Mk.3:27.

Discipleship

The discipleship theme is taken up by Mark as he begins to unpack the dramatic calling of the disciples at the beginning of his Gospel narrative.

“As soon as” (to use Mark’s favourite phrase), Jesus, Simon, James, Andrew and John leave the Capernaum synagogue (where, you will recall, we left them last week with the place in an uproar at Jesus’ teaching and exorcism), they go to the house of Simon and Andrew where their Simon’s mother-in-law lays ill with a fever.

Why are these people mentioned by name? Mark’s “good news” is generally accepted as the oldest account of Jesus’ mission and also the basic source for the Gospel of Matthew and Luke. Certainly, the credibility of this story as being sourced from an eye witness account, is added to with reference to the particular people involved. If things didn’t happen the way Peter recollected it, then the others named could well contradict him.³

But more important to note is how the reference to these individuals functions in Mark’s narrative: it reminds us that Jesus is *accompanied* by those he called to be *disciples*. They are about to learn something concerning what true discipleship means⁴ beyond their initial enthusiastic response to jump on the Jesus bandwagon:

- the disciple is one who *accompanies* Jesus. And when they do, they both *witness* what he does and are *involved in* his mission.
- This mission, as we learn again from the narrative, is about bringing healing and restoration to a marginalised Israel – in this

³ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2006.

⁴ See Morna Hooker, from Andrew Gregory (ed), *The Fourfold Gospel Commentary*, SPCK 2006, pg.73 f.f.

case represented by a woman.

The call to discipleship, then, is not just to “believe”, nor for that matter, to be good, nor is it a call to unsustainable enthusiasm. Rather, the call to discipleship is a call to *participate actively* in extending God’s reign.

Peter’s mother-in-law has a dramatic healing. Her immediate response is to *serve* Jesus and the disciples. This emphasises the miraculous nature of the healing, that she is completely restored (not just helped up by an inspirational Jesus), but also points to something deeper.

Sure, she takes up her culturally and socially proscribed role and waits on the men, moreover she is no doubt grateful to her son-in-law for bringing Jesus to her, and so she wants to show it in a way she know how; but there is also a signal here to the disciples, if only they could see it, that when the kingdom of God comes near, those authentically touched by it are propelled into service.

The verb “to serve” here, or ‘to wait upon’ as it is sometimes translated,⁵ is the same one Jesus will use later⁶ of his own service to others, a service which he expected his disciples to share, though they repeatedly failed to do so. For the first time in Mark’s Gospel – but not the last – we find a *woman*, and *outsider* grasping what true discipleship means. As Jesus would later spell out to his disciples:

... The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.⁷

⁵ See NIV c.f. NRSV.

⁶ Mk.10:45

⁷ Mk.10:45

Power Ministry

The healing of the woman is the first miracle recorded in Mark but it wasn't unique. If Jesus scholars, divided as they are on many things, can agree on just one thing, it is that astonishing healings were the hallmark of Jesus' public ministry.

That evening, at sundown, the sick and possessed were brought to Jesus in such numbers that Mark says "the whole city gathered around the door".⁸ Here Mark echoes his earlier report concerning John, that "the whole of the Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem went out to him".⁹

No doubt there's some Semitic hyperbole here, but Mark is exaggerating to make the point that just as the numbers following John showed that he faithfully fulfilled his task of preparing God's people for the arrival of the anointed one; so too, the unclean flocking to Jesus – for whatever *their* motives, and whatever *their* understanding of who he was, or what was happening in their midst – vindicated Jesus' roll as the faithful Israelite who brought healing and restoration to Israel.

But it also tells us something else: when the Kingdom of God is manifested in power, not just in words, people will be attracted.

Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry embodies the rule of God in the midst of his people; his words of power, and miracles, manifest the God's reign in microcosm and point the way to what is to come.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, he refers to Jesus' "preaching", yet we are actually given little of it in the Gospel compared to the other three. Rather, Jesus' proclamation and teaching is always associated with his power ministry of casting out the forces of evil and restoring people to

⁸ Mk.1:33

⁹ Mk.1:5

wholeness. Mark's is an 'action Gospel', it is the Gospel of *enacted* truth, of the word of power, of faith realised.

Prayer

Later in the Gospel, close to his time of death, Mark reports Jesus as reproving the disciples:

Have faith in God! Truly I tell you... whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.¹⁰

And so, in what seems an abrupt change of tack – but isn't really – early in the morning while it was yet very dark, Jesus gets up and heads back to the wilderness.¹¹ This is no random insertion by Mark interrupting a ripping yarn with a bit of piety. We are being told something...

Firstly, Jesus' ministry of power is a *spiritual* ministry. Just as it was the Holy Spirit which came upon Jesus, "descending upon him like a dove",¹² anointing him for his mission, then sending him into the wilderness for a time of testing; so too, the Holy One of God, filled with the Spirit yet in need of sustenance, seeks out the presence of God which *personally* sustains him.

Jesus' ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, is rooted in *solitary*, *earnest* prayer, in seeking God in stillness – even in the midst of, or, perhaps, more accurately, *because* of the exhausting demands of mission.

Yet, whilst driven by need, this was intentional time out with his Father, for Jesus. That he "gets up" (as Mark emphasises in the text) "in the

¹⁰ Mk.11:22b-23a,24b composite

¹¹ Mk.1:35.

¹² Mk.1:10

morning while it [was] yet dark”,¹³ indicates that this was *disciplined* prayer, not easy, casual “arrow prayers” of the desperate. Even though Jesus clearly had a sense of his Father’s moment by moment nearness, still he makes time to pray alone in the “deserted place”.

This is what a Benedictine friend of mine calls, “knee aching prayer”; it is the prayer of *discipline* as much as of need; and it comes from an understanding that since ministry and mission is about conflict and encounter, so too *successful* and powerful ministry and mission rests upon a *personal* relationship with God *cultivated* in prayer.

Later in his mission when Jesus casts out a demon from a wretched boy, the disciples complain, “why couldn’t *we* do it?!” Leaving aside their apparent concern for their own mana over the deliverance of the boy, Jesus’ rejoinder is instructive for anyone, or any group of people – including a parish which has intention of proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed in their community:

This kind [he says] can come out only through prayer.¹⁴

Coda...

With Jesus missing, the disciples “hunt” him down (interestingly, they know where to look). Their words seem to suggest they, like the people, see him as a wonder worker, albeit one gone AWOL who they don’t want out of their sight. Whatever their understanding or motivation, they at least show the true nature of the disciple – one who seeks after Jesus; and seeking, they find him.

Jesus for his part, greets these inadequates, as he might greet us:

¹³ Mk.1:35

¹⁴ Mk.9:29

Lets' go ...and proclaim the message... for that is what I
came to do...