

Mark 2:1-12 ~ Discipleship and conflict

Over the last three weeks we have noted that the central theme of Mark's "good news" is the arrival of the reign of God in the person of Jesus.

In Jesus' confrontation with the demonic we learn something of the nature of this Kingdom which he embodies: for Mark, the interpreter, as it were, of Peter's recollections,¹ Jesus' mission was a struggle to the death, to set us free from bondage to "the strong man", as he puts it.²

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.

In our sifting of the opening chapters of Mark, several key elements of such a gospel have emerged. These can be listed as:

- The call to discipleship
- The shape of Jesus' mission
- Jesus' missional spirituality
- Jesus' costly redemption of humanity

If you have missed sermons over the last three weeks can I urge you to grab a copy and have a read so you can see how these elements of mark's "good news", have emerged. However, let me just quickly summarise these key elements in turn:

- Firstly, *discipleship* is seen as *participation* in Jesus' mission; it is not a matter of confessing certain beliefs *about* God or even being good, it is about *being with* Jesus and so *doing as he does*.

¹ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2006.

² Mk.3:27.

- Secondly, this being so, *power ministry* and *prayer* lie at the core of gospel “proclamation”. When Jesus is present, this is manifest through extraordinary things happening. This kind of “proclamation” is grounded in prayer.
- Thirdly, *passion*, seen in Jesus as a mixture of *holy anger* and *compassion*, becomes the dynamic which characterises this type of missional spirituality.
- And lastly, we have seen in Jesus’ encounter with the unclean, early pointers to the nature of *redemption* this “good news” offers. It is a *costly* redemption, obtained by Jesus through *identification* and *substitution* with those he comes to set free. The power of God is ultimately demonstrated through vulnerability and suffering.

If there is one theme that links these elements of mark’s gospel it is that of *conflict*.

Today’s gospel story of the dramatic healing of the paralysed man takes this further as it kicks off a sequence of five conflict stories in which Jesus challenges notions of religion and the social order it supports.³ These stories are also very significant, since, within them lie the seeds not just of Jesus’ death, but, ultimately, his triumph.

Ironically, in today’s story we find Jesus not in direct confrontation with the demonic as we have previously but, rather, with the very ones who are meant to uphold the rule of God among his people.

⁴ A hint of this conflict had already appeared, in an otherwise innocent sounding observation, made by those who heard Jesus teach in the

³ Mk.2:1-3:6.

⁴ This insight and some of the text that follows is borrowed from Fr. Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom ~ A theological reading of Mark’s Gospel*, Liturgical press, Collegeville Minnesota, 2008. Pg.52 f.f. Quotes are not shown here.

synagogue at Capernaum, where it was said: “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes”.⁵

In the healing of the paralysed man, this until now hidden conflict with the religious, legal and political authorities is brought into the open.

In Jesus’ striking image which Mark relates just after this story,⁶ the “new wine” of the Kingdom is beginning to burst the “old wineskins” currently in place. The authorities sense this and we see them moving to counter it.

Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom and the renewal of relationship with God it holds out,⁷ presents a *challenge* to prevailing understandings of God’s ways and a *threat* to those who guard them and the governing elite who benefit from them. These groupings – namely the Scribes, Pharisees and Herodian party – normally an unlikely alliance, are unified through mutual interest.

How is this evident in our story?

⁸ In the ancient world physical afflictions were generally considered to be the result of sin.⁹ Working within this world view, when the man is dramatically presented before Jesus asking for healing, Jesus goes to the root of the problem and does what only God can do, he forgives the man’s sins and so restores him to wholeness.

The Torah gave priests authority to *pronounce* a person clean, or forgiven, once the cure had been verified and the requisite sacrifices had been made; but only *God* could remove the disease or forgive the sins. So the Scribes in our story are correct in saying that forgiveness is a divine prerogative and their hostility is understandable.

Likewise, Jesus’ words are clearly recalled by Peter since they are so remarkable and, in the end, got Jesus into so much trouble. As the

⁵ Mk.1:22.

⁶ Mk.2:22.

⁷ Mk.1:14-15.

⁸ See Morna Hooker, from Andrew Gregory (ed), *The Fourfold Gospel Commentary*, SPCK 2006, pg.75.

⁹ *c.f.* Jn.9:1-3.

Scribes were well aware, Jesus was claiming to be God. And they are having none of it.

So whilst, as I said, we do not see in this story Jesus in explicit confrontation with the world of the demonic, that fundamental conflict is not absent. This time, the forces of evil attack under the guise of religion – at once well-meaning yet malevolent and self-interested. We see the tell-tale destructiveness of the demonic appearing just a little while later in Mark’s narrative when the Pharisees, increasingly incensed at Jesus, “went out and immediately conspired with [their enemies] the Herodians against him, how to destroy him”.¹⁰

This little story, then, as moving as it is regarding the man and his friends, sets the scene for the ultimate conflict of the Jesus story. It looks toward a conflict that will only be resolved through the way of the cross and resurrection.

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As I have pondered this over the week, it appears to me there is, perhaps, a caution here for us (and by us, I especially address myself as the one charged with oversight of this little part of God’s vineyard), as we approach a review of mission as a parish. And the caution is this:

- when God moves we must be careful that we discern what is happening and don’t get in the way.

Just a little later Jesus becomes very angry “and deeply distressed at [the Scribes and Pharisees] for their stubbornness of heart” in refusing to hear or see the good in what he was doing.¹¹ Quite clearly Jesus was doing the things that only God could do. Yet those charged with the oversight of God’s people refused to believe it.

Still later Jesus identifies this stubbornness as wilful resisting of the Holy Spirit, the only sin that cuts us off from God completely.¹²

¹⁰ Mk.3:6.

¹¹ Mk.3.

¹² Mk.3:28-30.

If we don't want to be side-lined by God as a church (like those who plotted Jesus' destruction), we must approach God's work among us with *open* and *discerning* hearts.

Part of this will be ensuring we listen and look attentively at what is happening around us and in our midst; we need to see the wood and not just the trees.

The conflictual nature of this story of Jesus' healing of the paralysed man can easily obscure what lies at the root of this story: *forgiveness* and *faith*.

I want to return to these themes in Lent. Sufficient to note here that the faith which appropriates forgiveness and healing in today's story, is not the just faith of the man, but that of his four friends. They see their chance for their friend and they dramatically seize it. As noted last week, there is an element of desperation in their initiative, but it is an initiative that springs from believe that Jesus can and will act to set the man free from his paralysis. In verse 7 we read:

...when Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralysed man,
"Son, your sins are forgiven".

The paralysis that held the man bound is broken. Jesus has spoken into his life. The man has been forgiven. Once marginalised he is restored as a "son" of Israel.

In this, the man stands as a promise to all who would be part of God's family; to all who would receive healing and wholeness from God.

Forgiveness is at the heart of Christ's work of redemption. It is easy to miss this in the conflict which characteristically surrounds God's activity.

Our challenge is to not miss God's work among us through fear, narrow mindedness, stubbornness or self-interest. Rather, with the man's friends, our call is to understand what God is doing and seize it in faith.