

After a long gap, we return to weekly readings from Mark on 13 June (11th Sunday of the Year) until 18 July (16th Sunday of the Year). Then, because Mark only has 16 chapters, we have an interlude from John 6. This, and the reading for Corpus Christi (6 June), which we also heard on Palm Sunday, includes teaching on the Eucharist. We return to Mark from 29 August until Advent. In our reading of Mark so far, we have read Mk 1; Mk 14-16 (the Passion and Resurrection) and also 9:2-10 (the Transfiguration). The reading for 13 June is Mk 4:26-34; Mk 2:1-4:25 has been omitted. I shall first give a brief summary of these intervening chapters, but if you want to read comments only on the Sunday readings go to * on page 2.

Mark 2-3 continue with more stories of miraculous healings and casting out of demons and also the call of more disciples, but there is a difference: we begin to read of conflicts and opposition to Jesus. In each of these following healings or exorcisms, Mark does not just recount the event, but gives us some explanation or interpretation.

Jesus heals a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12)

Jesus did not just heal the paralytic, who had to be let down through the roof because the crowds were so great, but he also said, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Thus, we see Jesus not just as another miracle worker, but as someone with power to forgive sins. The scribes asked was it blasphemy. The people, seeing the man was healed, immediately (εὐθὺς), glorified God.

Jesus calls Levi (Mark 2:13-17)

The scribes questioned why Jesus sat with tax collectors and sinners in Levi’s house; they would have considered these people unclean. Jesus did not ignore such people; his followers too must free themselves from prejudice and discrimination.

The question about fasting (Mark 2:18-22)

Joy and celebration were more appropriate when Jesus was present. Instead of the Jewish fast days, Christians began to focus on Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, when Jesus died, as times of penance and fasting, and on Easter Sunday, when he rose, as a day of rejoicing. Mark is suggesting that our calendar should reflect our faith, not the secular world around us.

Pronouncements about the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-8; 3:1-6)

The Pharisees condemned the disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus for curing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Mark is teaching that Jesus was free to save life on the Sabbath. Meanwhile, we hear for the first time that the Pharisees went out immediately (εὐθὺς) and began to plan how to destroy Jesus.

A multitude at the lakeside (Mark 3:7-12)

Crowds came to the lake to be healed by Jesus. The unclean spirits knew who he was - the Son of God – but Jesus ordered them not to make it known. Note that people came from all around: diversity was a feature from the earliest day.

Jesus appoints the Twelve (Mark 3:13-19)

Mountains are special places for Mark: Jesus called the disciples (3:13) and sent them to preach and cast out demons (3:14-15); he prayed (6:46) and was transfigured (9:2f) on a mountain. The call to mission is still part of the Christian life, whether at home or in foreign lands. Note that Judas is mentioned here, at the call of the disciples, as the one who would betray Jesus (3:19).

Jesus and Beelzebul (Mark 3:20-30)

Opposition to Jesus begins to intensify: his family thought he was out of his mind, and the scribes suggested that he used the power of Satan to drive out demons. Those who should have recognised who Jesus was, misunderstood him. The good news is ‘people will be forgiven for their sins’ (3:28).

The true kindred of Jesus (Mark 3:31-5)

The disciples - his followers - are his true family. It follows, as a conclusion, that if we are part of the Christian family, we too should care for each other.

Teaching of Jesus on parables (Mark 4)

Again by the lake, Jesus taught a large crowd the parable of the sower (4:1-9) then explained it to his disciples (4:10-20). Here, and also in 7:14-23; 9:14-29; 13:1-8, Jesus first taught publicly and then to his disciples in private. Sadly, they did not seem to benefit much and, as we saw in the Passion, in the end deserted him. It's still true today: people who have been taught the Faith later abandon it. However, although Peter betrayed Jesus, in the end he became a faithful witness who died for him. There is always hope.

What is a parable? I was taught as a child that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Parables start from a familiar thing, to teach something about the Kingdom of God. Scholars differ in their interpretation of the first of these three parables, which is read from Matthew in Year A. This is the first of two major teaching speeches of Jesus in Mark (the second is in Mk13). Overall the message is one of hope: the world is the battleground between Jesus and Satan but Jesus is proclaiming the good news of God's reign: ultimately, despite human weakness and Satan's attacks, those who do accept God's word will bear fruit in a way that exceeds what we could imagine.

***13 June (11th Sunday) Parables about seeds (Mark 4:26-34)**

The reading starts with the second of the three parables in this chapter. Mark is the only evangelist to record it. It presents a positive message, akin to that of the Wisdom writers, that in the end all things will work together for good. There is a contrast between the tiny seed and the final harvest. Whilst the farmer sleeps, the earth produces the crop, of its own accord, so to speak. The parable is teaching that in a similar way God is in charge of the growth of the Kingdom. It would be an encouragement and a message of hope to Mark's readers, who were probably living through persecution. Just like the harvest, so too the kingdom will grow gradually and one day be revealed in glory. Mk 4:29 echoes a passage in Joel 3:13 where the sickle represents God's vengeance. Mark reverses this, using the harvest imagery to say something positive.

The parable of the mustard seed is also used to give teaching about the Kingdom. Mustard seed bushes grow in profusion all around the Sea of Galilee. It must have seemed strange for somebody to bother sowing those tiny seeds. The bushes grow to as much as 6-8 feet high. Pliny wrote that the seed germinated quickly and could take over a garden. As Crossan said, the point is that the kingdom is both hardy and intrusive. Mark's hearers would have connected this parable with OT passages: in Dan 4:20-22 Daniel interprets the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar about a great tree whose top reached heaven, as a symbol of the Davidic king's power. More directly, Ezek 17:22-23 refers to a tall, noble cedar tree in the shade of whose branches will rest winged creatures of every kind'. It is as if there is a correspondence between the kingdom and the renewed Israel where living creatures would take refuge. It may also recall the tree of life in Gen 2:9. The kingdom is comparable with a tiny seed being transformed into something grand. Once more, the message is of hope. God's kingdom will grow out of something ordinary, just like the mustard seed grows.

20th June (12th Sunday) Jesus stills a storm (Mark 4:35-41)

Jesus moves from teaching the crowd to showing himself to his disciples, as a kind of parable, by his actions. By going to the other side of the lake he was moving to Gentile territory. The largest concentration of miracles in Mark is from 4:35-8:26). There is little opposition and it is only in 7:1-8 that scribes and Pharisees reappear. Nineham identifies three main sets of motifs in this event: Jesus' ability to control the sea was a sign of divine power, as mentioned in several psalms e.g. Pss 89:9; 65:7. The image of the storm was a metaphor for evil forces and trials of just people from which only God's power could save e.g. Pss 18:16; 69:1-2. Finally, the religious person should trust God amidst storms because he can calm the roaring of the sea e.g. Pss 46:1-3; 65:5-8. The disciples would have been familiar with these psalms and especially Ps 107:23-32 which has very similar ideas to this narrative. Mark is showing Jesus stilling the storm like God does in the psalms. The disciples have been given a direct encounter with the mystery of the kingdom but Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith; they ask themselves, 'who then is this?' (4:40-41). Mark's first readers, who had probably recently experienced Nero's persecution, could equally well have asked, 'Do you not care that we are perishing?'

27 June (13th Sunday) A girl restored to life and a woman healed (Mark 5:21-43)

Mark 5:1-20 is omitted. In Gentile territory, a demon possessed man ran towards Jesus, who he recognised as 'Son of the Most High God' (5:7). Jesus healed him and told him to go home and tell his friends 'how much the Lord has done for you' (5:19). Our gospel reading, back in Jewish territory, has the raising to life of a girl interjected into a story of a healing of a woman. The chapter thus has three miracles, all connected with people that Jews considered to be unclean: the first restores to his right mind a Gentile man who was demon possessed; the last restores to her parents the daughter, thought to be dead, of a synagogue leader. The middle one is a Jewish woman whose flow of blood had alienated her for twelve years from Temple and synagogue; she was restored both to herself and to her community. The urgency of the two healings is shown by the use of immediately (**εὐθὺς**) three times (5:29, 30, 42).

The woman must once have had money to be able to pay doctors, which the poor could not afford. In Judaism, her lengthy haemorrhaging would make her ritually, sexually and religiously unclean; she was getting progressively worse (5:26). She showed courage in touching Jesus and, although violating the purity code, believed 'I will be made well' (5:28). The disciples could not understand Jesus' power; he addressed the woman as daughter, healed her, and said her faith had saved her.

The second healing also had the twelve year old girl called daughter, by her father. She, too, another female, is seriously ill, almost at the point of death, and faith is involved: Jairus believed Jesus could heal her. To Jairus death was an occasion not only of sadness but of fear, because it made the body, and anyone who touched it, unclean. The people were weeping because, to them, death was final. Jesus said to Jairus, 'Do not fear, only believe' (5:36). The word that Jesus used, 'get up' or arise (5:41) is the same as is used for his resurrection. Both healings have a misunderstanding of Jesus power (5:31; 40) followed by direct evidence of it (5:34; 42). The reaction of 'amazement' (5:42) to the girl getting up and being able to walk is the same as that when the paralytic got up (2:12) and of the women when they were told that Jesus had been raised (16:8). Note that the three disciples present – Peter,

James and John – were the first to be called, and were present both at the Transfiguration and in Gethsemane. They were with Jesus at this healing of two women near to death, and at other important moments. Finally, this is one of several occasions when Jesus commands silence following a miracle.

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Quotations are from NRSV, as used in Bible Society Mark's Gospel