

4 July (14th Sunday) The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Mark 6:1-6)

Mark understands Nazareth as Jesus' home town (see also 1:9). The disciples have no role in this section but do in the next. The synagogue officials could ask any Jewish layman to address people in the synagogue and Mark has Jesus start his ministry by teaching in Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21) and between that and Mk 3 Jesus carried out exorcisms and healings in synagogues, but after this rejection in Mk 6 he does not enter a synagogue again. People were astonished/astounded at Jesus teaching here (6:2) as also in 1:22 and 11:18.

Mk 6:2 is the only place where Mark uses the term wisdom (Sophia) to refer to Jesus. There are five questions, all based around the identity of Jesus. Just as the religious authorities in 3:6 did not recognise Jesus, neither did his own family and neighbours. Already Mark has identified Jesus' true kindred as those who do the will of God (3:35). Here, in response to the questions about wisdom, Jesus set up, in 6:4, his own wisdom saying about prophets only being without honour amidst their own family and neighbours. It could be an echo of Is 53:3 where the Suffering Servant also was rejected. All three Synoptic gospels report that Jesus was rejected in his own town, whilst John's Prologue (1:11) says he was rejected by his 'own people'. The subsequent mission of the Twelve (6:7-13), modelled on that of Jesus, shows them as his new family.

Jesus is identified as a carpenter and as 'the son of Mary' (6:3) which is unusual – sons are usually named in relation to fathers. However, Mark is also unusual in naming the women at the cross in relation to their sons rather than their husbands (15:40). The nature of the brothers and sisters of Jesus is problematic. Three solutions have been suggested: First, that these were natural children of Joseph and Mary. Many in the ancient church such as Tertullian held this view which is that of many non Catholic scholars today. Secondly, they could be children of Joseph by an earlier marriage, and thirdly (the view of Jerome) they were cousins of Jesus, maybe the children of Mary's sister. Other NT references would need to be discussed to explore the issue further, which I shall not be doing!

A final point here is that Jesus 'could do no deed of power there' except to cure a few sick people, and 'he was amazed at their unbelief' (6:5-6). Jesus' power seems to depend on the belief of those present. As Erich Grasser said, 'Just as his power is our salvation, so our unbelief is his powerlessness'. Mark builds up the story from the plan to kill Jesus in 3:6 through this rejection in 6:1-6 to failure of his disciples to understand (8:14-21), leading up to the cross.

11 July (15th Sunday) The Mission of the Twelve (Mark 6:7-13)

After rejection by his family and neighbours, Jesus commissioned the Twelve. He warned them (6:11) that, like in Nazareth, they too may be rejected. Their mission, like that of Jesus, was to preach repentance (see 1:14-15), cast out demons and cure the sick. The anointing with oil is interesting. We read of this early Christian practice also in James 5:14-15) and of course it happens still in the Sacrament of the Sick.

At their original call the disciples were given authority to preach and to cast out demons (3:13-19) but now they were expected to leave everything behind, taking just a staff and sandals, but no food, money or spare clothes (6:8-9). Other travelling

missionaries of those days could make money out of preaching, but these were to be reliant on God for their needs and to accept what hospitality was offered (6:10).

Sweetland comments, 'from this text it is fair to conclude that genuine discipleship has a missionary dimension.' This reminds me of the Missio Red Box, which still says, 'To be a Christian is to be a missionary.' We are not all called to give up everything and go as foreign missionaries, but we should pray for those that do, and help them financially, as we are able. The new evangelisation also teaches us that mission is not only for foreign lands but here, not just by what we say but especially by how we are. As one modern hymn says, 'they will know we are Christians by our love'. This passage encourages us to reflect on what our faith should mean for us today. The *Sacra Pagina* authors talk of the church's self identity 'as a community that is sent' and which is 'to proclaim the word in freedom and fearlessness. Like Jesus it is to confront the power of evil and serve as an agent of God's healing power.' Later, in 6:30-31, the disciples returned and reported back to Jesus. He invited them to go to a deserted place to rest and, probably, to pray.

***The death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29)**

Passages marked * are not in the Sunday readings.

Mark has placed this story, well known beyond Scripture as great literature, in between the commissioning of the disciples and their return from their first mission, thus showing that prophets, like John, or Jesus, can expect to suffer and even die for their faith. The weak Herod Antipas could be compared with Pilate whilst Jesus' disciples do not, like John's, come to ask for his body but, ironically, one new disciple – Joseph of Arimathea – himself a member of the Council that condemned Jesus. The idea of being raised up, present in several miracle stories, is also here, with a suggestion (6:14-16) that Jesus may be John who has been 'raised'. Thus this story is used by Mark to foreshadow Jesus' death and resurrection.

18 July (16th Sunday) Feeding the 5000 (Mark 6:30-44)

Note that ONLY 6:30-34 is read this Sunday so it does not include the miraculous feeding. This is the only miracle present in all four Gospels. There are also two variant forms with a feeding of 4000 in Mk 8:1-10 and Matt 15:32-39. The setting, prior to the sandwiched account of John's death, is around Nazareth (6:1-6) so is still in Jewish territory, on the western side of the lake. Hence the reference to 12 baskets left over (6:43) would have reminded Mark's readers of the twelve tribes of Israel and that this feeding is directed to the Jews. Jesus had compassion on the crowd, but it was not because they would be hungry in a deserted place, but they were like 'sheep without a shepherd' (6:34). This is a reference to Zech 13:7 which Jesus quotes to his disciples on the Mount of Olives (14:27), referring to his own death and to the disciples who deserted him and fled (14:50). Since the Sunday reading concludes with 6:34 the message focuses on the return of the disciples from their first mission, and Jesus' imminent death, when the disciples scattered, deserting him as he prayed in Gethsemane. It could also refer to Ezek 34:11-16 where God promises to shepherd the hungry sheep.

*The passage continues from 6:35, with the necessity to feed the people because it was late and they were in a deserted place. Mark's readers would have recollected God feeding the Israelites with manna in the desert (Ex 16) or Elisha multiplying barley loaves and grain (2Kgs 4:42-4). The disciples, commissioned to feed the

people, would be assuming their role as shepherds but, of course, they misunderstood and wanted to send the people away to buy bread (6:35-6).

Mark has frequent references to bread and eating: Jesus is seen eating with sinners (2:16); the disciples feast rather than fast (2:18-19) and pick grain on the Sabbath (2:23-8) whilst those who are healed go on to prepare food (1:31) or be given something to eat (5:43). Here, the message is clearly Eucharistic. We know this because here (6:41) just as in Mk 14:22 and in St Paul's account (1 Cor 11:23-5) Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the loaves. It can also be seen as looking forward to the eschatological banquet to be celebrated when the Kingdom of God has come in its fullness, since after the words of institution in Mk 14 Jesus says he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until he 'drinks it new in the Kingdom of God' (14:25).

*** Jesus walks on the water (Mark 6:45-52)**

This passage starts with a reference to the prayer life of Jesus: he sent his disciples across the lake whilst he went off alone to pray (6:45-6). There are many references in Mark to Jesus going off to pray; these include prayer before his first preaching tour (1:35), here before his second journey onto Gentile territory, in Gethsemane (14:32-9) and finally, his cry from the cross (15:34). He blessed the food in 6:41 and 8:6-7. He also expected his followers to pray (11:24-5). Whereas on the first journey to Gentile territory Jesus led the way (4:35-41) here it is the disciples going first (6:45) but they fail to recognise Jesus, who had previously stilled the storm. Then, they were 'filled with great awe' (4:41) but on this occasion when they saw him walking on the lake they were 'terrified' (6:50). Twice we have that little word immediately (6:45, 50). The words Jesus spoke should have encouraged them not to be afraid: 'It is I' would almost certainly remind them of 'I am', the divine name revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:14). Mark has told his readers from the very first verse that Jesus is the Son of God yet his disciples fail to understand until after he has risen from the dead. Indeed, we are told here that 'their hearts were hardened' (6:52). This can be thought of as a sinner's obstinate resistance to the voice of God. It was used of the Pharisees who witnessed the healing of the man with the withered hand (3:5) but sadly Jesus' disciples reacted in just the same way.

***Healing the sick in Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-6)**

Use of at once/immediately in 6:54 is particularly significant. At the start of Mk 6 people in Jesus' home town failed to recognise him as anyone other than a local carpenter. When Jesus saw the disciples were terrified on the lake he spoke to them immediately but they were astounded and had not understood. Yet now people knew who Jesus was at once and rushed around to bring the sick to him. He did numerous healings on the eastern side of the lake, as well as the exorcism earlier in Mk 5:1-20. The market places (6:56) which were the centre of political and commercial activity became places where Jesus healed the sick.

On 25 July (17th week) readings from John 6 commence, until 22 August (21st week). Readings from Mark resume on 29 August, continuing with Mark 7, and continue until Mk 13 on 14 November. I shall continue the notes before Mark resumes.

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