

We last read from Mark on 18 July (16th Sunday) when the reading was Mk 6:30-34 but my notes in **Year of Mark 6** included the whole of Mark 6. This is still available on www.st-mary.org.uk beside our logo. After the weeks of reading John 6 we now return to Mark for the rest of Year B.



29 August (22nd Sunday) The tradition of the elders (Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-3)

This reading is rather unusual, with omission of verses at two points, but it does make clear the theme: Jesus' relationship to what is unclean. This has developed from early in the gospel: Jesus healing a man with an unclean spirit (1:21-7), curing a leper (1:40-45), eating with sinners (2:13-17), healing the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20) and giving the disciples power to cast out unclean spirits (6:7).

Many of us are probably aware that Orthodox Jews only eat kosher foods that comply with guidelines on what can be eaten and how it is to be prepared. This passage concerns what is to be considered unclean. The Pharisees and some scribes saw Jesus' disciples eating without following 'the tradition of the elders' (7:3) about washing their hands and the various utensils used. I was surprised when I first went to Uganda to find water for hand washing in the most humble of places where food was served, and to be brought a bowl of hot water, soap and a towel if eating in a home. I presume the missionaries had stressed hygiene! Now we must all recall the great stress on hand washing at the start of the pandemic. Probably some of us still wipe everything we buy. We have once again been reminded about making sure nothing is unclean! The disciples were accused of eating 'with defiled hands' (7:5). In 7:6-7 Jesus uses Isaiah 29:13 as a response: the people were not honouring God with their hearts; their worship involved routine observation of rules rather than honouring God from their heart. In the omitted 7:10-12 Jesus gave an example of this but some commentators are unsure of the extent to which this practice was prevalent at the time of Jesus. The *Sacra Pagina* authors identify many difficulties in interpretation of this event and it is probably best to see it simply as teaching that it is not food that defiles a person but what comes from the human heart (7:21-3). This narrative concerned with Jewish food laws prepares for the journey of Jesus into Gentile territory where he meets a Gentile woman and a man, healing the woman's child and the deaf man (7:24-37); he then feeds 4000 in Gentile territory.

Passages marked * are not in the Sunday readings.

***The Syrophenician woman's faith (Mark 7:24-30)**

Tyre is in Gentile territory. Josephus described the people of Tyre as bitter enemies of the Jews. Unusually, Jesus was here alone but 'could not escape notice' even though he did not want anyone to know he was there' (7:24). Use of *εὐθὺς* (7:25 immediately) indicates the importance of the encounter. It echoes Elijah's visit to Zarephath where a widow's son is brought back to life (1 Kgs 17:8f) and Elisha's raising of the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kgs 4:18-37) or curing a Syrian of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1-19). Faith is not mentioned but the woman's persistence could be understood as faith. The 'children' were Israelites; 'dogs' was a common insulting way for Jews to refer to Gentiles. The word translated as food in 7:27 is literally 'bread' which in common Jewish usage could refer to God's word. After the woman's bold response, Jesus agreed to cast the demon from her daughter. Mark may be showing that Jesus went first to Jews but would extend God's word to Gentiles.

5 September (23rd Sunday) Jesus cures a deaf man (Mark 7:31-7)

This is the second time Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee (the first is 4:35f); he first travelled through the Gentile area around Tyre and Sidon before revisiting the Decapolis. This was a federation of ten Hellenistic cities where the demoniac that Jesus healed proclaimed what he had done (5:20).

Deafness was regarded as tragic in Biblical times (cf Ps 38:13); the man also seems to have a speech problem (7:32). He was brought to Jesus then, in private, Jesus performed a series of ritual actions (7:33) such as were used by both Jewish and Greek healers. Once more, use of *εϋθους* shows this is significant. It is more than just a simple healing. Jesus is doing what God had promised in Is 35:5-6) and whilst the Gentile onlookers were astounded (7:37), still, in 8:17 the disciples failed to understand. Mark's readers would surely have noticed the Old Testament reference and seen this as God's power working also amongst Gentiles. As the church began to expand and contact other cultures this could be seen as an indication that the proclamation of the gospel included a confrontation with human suffering. It is just as relevant now as it was then; as I write this we seem to be surrounded by so much suffering worldwide. Just a few minutes before I wrote Cardinal Vincent spoke on the BBC Radio 4 Sunday programme urging our country to respond with great generosity to the plight of Afghanistan refugees.

***Feeding the 4000 (Mark 8:1-21)**

Over the next three weeks there are readings from Mk8-9 but there are big omissions. If I were to comment fully on all of these I think it would distort things from the assigned verses so I will just make a few significant points!

There has already been a miraculous feeding of 5000 in Mk 6:30-44. Both accounts have a Eucharistic aspect but the first was to a Jewish group whereas this follows on from two miracles in Gentile territory. It is interesting to compare both the similarities and differences. Both conclude with the disciples not understanding.

*** Jesus cures a blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-6)**

Having just cleared the ears of the deaf, Jesus now opens the eyes of the blind, linking again to Is 35:5-6. He performs a miraculous healing, but in two stages. Sabin suggests that just as in Hebrew poetry, such as Ps 19, the repetition may serve to enrich the meaning. Indeed, as we approach the second half of the gospel, in Mk 9-16, that can be seen as enriching Mk 1-8.

12 September (24th Sunday) Peter's declaration; Passion foretold (Mark 8:27-35)

We move now to a most important section of Mark, extending to Mk 10:52. At the beginning and end we find sight restored to a blind man. Jesus makes the first of three predictions of his death and resurrection. Each time the disciples misunderstand but Jesus then goes on to explain something of what it means to be his followers. The question, 'Who do you say that I am' (Mk 8:29) can be seen as the central theme of Mark and this section up to the end of Mk 10 is concerned with who Jesus is and what it means to be a disciple. When Jesus asked 'Who do you say that I am' Peter answered correctly, 'You are the Messiah' (8:29) but did not really understand what it meant. The average person would have expected a triumphant Davidic ruler. Maybe that was what Peter thought. If so, it is understandable that he was puzzled when Jesus talked about suffering. In each of the three Passion predictions the disciples

misunderstood; Jesus uses this to teach them about what discipleship involves. Here, he gives the hard teaching that the disciple is not to be preoccupied with possessions and must be prepared to make any sacrifice for Christ, even life itself (8:34-5). Jesus himself will be 'rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes' and will be killed but will 'rise again' after three days (9:31).

***The Transfiguration (Mark 9:1-13)**

The reference to the future coming in glory of Christ with the angels (8:35) leads on to the Transfiguration. We read this in Lent and you can find notes on it in **Year of Mark 2** on the parish website www.st-mary.org.uk.

*** The healing of a boy with a spirit (Mark 9:14-29)**

I suggest that as you read this passage, which has many links with earlier miracles, carefully described by Sabin, you use it to refresh your memory of these earlier cures. The unclean spirit stopped the boy speaking and hearing (9:25); compare 7:33-37 It had violent effects (9:18-26); compare 5:1-20
Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit (9:25); compare 1:25
People thought the boy was dead (9:26); compare 5:38-43
Jesus lifted the boy up (9:27); compare 5:41.

The earlier miracles seemed to happen almost automatically but here Jesus is teaching what is needed for healings. The disciples were there, arguing with the scribes (9:14) but they were unable to heal the boy (9:18) and asked Jesus why they had failed (9:28). The boy's father was not faithless (9:19) but said, 'I believe, help my unbelief' (9:24). The sick person needed to believe (9:23) i.e. to have faith; the healing only came 'through prayer' (9:29). It was not automatic.

19 September (25th Sunday) Second Passion prediction (Mark 9:30-37)

This is very brief. Jesus was with his disciples, teaching them about his betrayal, death and resurrection. Those responsible for his betrayal and death are identified in 10:33 and then 14:10, but not here. Once more the disciples did not understand, and 'were afraid to ask him' (9:32). The extent of their lack of understanding is shown because they were arguing with one another 'about who was the greatest' (9:34). Presumably their concern was about who should have the prominent role. Jesus explained his teaching by taking a child. The *Sacra Pagina* authors say a child was a 'non-person', totally dependent on others. Children had no status in the Greco Roman world. Followers of Jesus had to be servants of all, even those with no status or power. We are not told of the disciples' response; presumably they remained silent (and stunned?) just as when Jesus asked what they were arguing about (9:33-4).

26 September (26th Sunday) Further teaching (Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-8)

NRSV note b says 'verses 44 and 46 (which are identical with verse 48) are lacking in the best ancient authorities.

Commentators struggle to explain verses 38-43, and one wants to even rearrange them! I like Sweetland's suggestion: 9:38-41 'has led Christians and non Christians to work side by side on projects that are concerned with the universal common good'.

Some scholars think that the verses about stumbling should be interpreted as general sayings about discipleship; 9:42 would then be pointing to the seriousness of leading simple believers in to sin. The next three sayings are about parts of the body whereby

one may be led into sin. They seem very harsh and may be metaphorical. Sweetland says, 'The point is that the salvation of the whole person at the end time is worth any sacrifice now' whilst Noonan says 'Jesus teaches that it is better to be crippled for God than to remain strong and not be for him.'

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