

Over the next four weeks we shall hear almost all of Mark 10. There is then a big gap followed by two readings from the end of Mark 12 and one from near the end of Mark 13. These notes will therefore consider the first four Sundays of October. Year of Mark 9 will consider the readings for the last three Sundays of Year B as well as brief comment on the omitted sections.

3 October (27th Sunday) Divorce and blessing of children (Mark 10:2-16)

It is strange that verse one is omitted because this indicates that whereas in Galilee Jesus had been discussing his teaching with his disciples, in Judea he reverted to teaching publicly. The topic of the grounds for divorce was controversial amongst Pharisees (10:2). It still is, and I am by no means qualified to interpret it so will just give some factual background. The teaching of Jesus on divorce cannot be inferred just from this passage but must be considered in the light of references in Matthew and of Paul's comments in 1 Cor 7. When the Pharisees referred to the law (Deut 24:1-4) they may have been wanting to test the orthodoxy of Jesus. That passage assumes that divorce was the prerogative of the man. An example of a writ of divorce found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls is quoted by the *Sacra Pagina* authors:

'I divorce and repudiate of my own free will, I Joseph son of Naqsan you my wife, Miriamso that you are free on your part to go and become a wife of any Jewish man that you please.' Jesus said that Moses allowed such actions 'because of your hardness of heart' (10:5) and proceeded to refer to earlier teaching such as Gen 1:27 and 2:24. His private instruction to his disciples (10:10-12) extends the teaching on divorce to women as well as men. This was also allowed by Roman law at the time. To discuss church teaching on divorce today seek advice on who to consult within the diocese!

Having talked of marriage and divorce it is perhaps appropriate to read next of the blessing of little children (10:13-16). Probably it refers to children from infancy up to age twelve. Once again, in this part of the gospel the disciples are not depicted in a positive light. It is unclear why they 'spoke sternly to the people' (10:13). Whether in the New Testament or writing from the Greco Roman world, children are rarely mentioned. The passage shows the concern of Jesus for children but it also gives teaching about the kingdom of God: it is received as a gift and those who do not accept it like a child will not enter it (10:15). In 9:36-7 the child symbolises the sort of needy person the disciples were to serve whereas here the child is symbolising the sort of person they must become (10:13-16). In both cases it is the powerlessness and dependence of the child that is important, and the fact that disciples must receive the kingdom as a gift from God.

10 October (28th Sunday) The rich man (Mark 10:17-30)

Jesus has spoken about faithfulness in marriage as an ideal, followed by the idea of detachment from power by becoming like little children. Here he is teaching his disciples about detachment from possessions. It falls into three different sections. Firstly, in 10:17-22 Jesus challenges the view that riches are a sign of God's favour. There is evidence earlier of wealth being seen as a problem, such as in some of the minor prophets and in the Wisdom literature. Amos speaks of oppression of the poor in 4:1 and is more explicit about the behaviour of the rich in 5:11-12 and a more specific example is 'buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals' (8:4). Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 31:1-11 considers the right attitude to riches noting that 'one who pursues money will be led astray by it' and that 'gold is a stumbling block'.

This is the position taken in Mk 10:17-22: riches are seen as an obstacle to discipleship. The young man had kept all the commandments from his youth and wanted to know what he needed to 'do to inherit eternal life' (10:17). Jesus told him he needed to 'sell what you own, and give the money to the poor' (10:21) and then to follow Jesus. If he wanted to be a disciple he could not have possessions because the mission involved travelling around, following Jesus. The message seems to be that to be part of the apostolic mission a disciple could not have possessions which interfered with carrying out the mission.

The second section (10:23-7) is private teaching for the disciples and here the message is 'how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God' (10:23). The Magnificat has the same message: 'He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:53). In today's language this is the preferential option for the poor. The implication is that the rich can be so distracted by material things that they fail to recognise that the kingdom of God is a gift. The reference to the difficulty of a camel going through the eye of a needle (10:25) is usually linked to a very low gate into Jerusalem. The point of the exaggeration is to illustrate how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom, whilst the poor more readily recognise that it is a gift. However, fear not: the good thing is that 'for God all things are possible' (10:27).

In the third section (10:28-31) Peter points out that they have left everything to follow Jesus and the good news is that those who have embraced poverty to follow Jesus' mission will receive rewards 'in this age ... and in the age to come eternal life' (10:30). Note however that they will receive these 'with persecutions'. This reminds us of the world in which Mark's community lived. In recent weeks it has also been very true for Christian converts living in Afghanistan. We are probably more aware these days of the many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted and even lose their lives. I had the privilege of meeting with Christians in several E European countries after the downfall of communism: they were poor and many had been persecuted with some even losing their lives for their faith. I will never understand how I came to be allowed in to an underground Mass in Prague. The faith of the people, who were very poorly dressed, was so evident. How true are the words of Tertullian: 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.' Overall, the message of this passage is simple: whilst riches can be an obstacle to discipleship there are present and future rewards for those who follow Jesus in poverty and total dependence on God, but they may involve persecution.

Passages marked * are not in the Sunday readings.

***Mark 10:32-4 Third Passion prediction**

Jerusalem is in the mountains so however it is approached you go 'up to Jerusalem' (10:32-3). There seem to be two groups of people accompanying Jesus. It is unclear why one group was amazed but presumably it was the disciples who were afraid. The fact that the next verses describe the request of James and John shows that once more the disciples failed to understand. Jesus again took aside the Twelve and began to 'tell them what was to happen to him' (10:32) using as before his title of Son of Man. This is by far the most detailed description with every aspect of what is in these verses fulfilled later in the description in the Passion narrative. Thus, before the event Jesus had made clear what was to happen to him. The following passage shows how little the disciples understood.

17 October (29th Sunday) The request of James and John (Mark 10:35-45)

Just as after the second Passion prediction the disciples showed their lack of understanding by arguing about who was the greatest (9:34), so also James and John showed complete failure to understand Jesus when they asked to sit at his right and left in glory (10:38). They were looking for a position of power and talking to Jesus as though he were their servant, asking him 'to do whatever we ask of you' (10:35). Jesus replied by speaking cryptically of his cup and his baptism (10:38-9). Cup is linked in the Psalms to one's destiny (Ps 16:5) and to salvation (Ps 116:13). Jews did carry out a ritual immersion but did not use the word baptism. Sabin suggests that here the idea is of a change of heart. Mark's readers could have linked the word cup with the institution of the Eucharist, and the cup which Jesus said 'is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many' (14:24). Paul makes a link between baptism and Christians being baptised into Christ's death (Rom 6:3). Sweetland makes an important point. He says that people often think 'that the best Christian is the one who suffers the most for their faith'. As the passage continues 10:42-5 makes it very clear that the focus of discipleship is not on suffering but on service. The one who wants to be great must be a servant (diakonos) whilst whoever wants 'to be first among you must be slave (doulos) of all'. A slave belonged to one owner and had to do what he was told. Followers of Jesus were to have as an ideal service of everyone and he himself gave the best example of this servant leadership. A ransom was the price for the release of a captive or for a slave to buy his or her freedom. Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45). This verse quotes Is 53:11 where God speaks of his chosen servant offering his life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of others. Mark is making the link with Jesus, God's servant, who offered his life as an atonement for the sins of others.

In 2013 Pope Francis called priests to 'be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep' and in *Evangelii Gaudium* he extended the idea to all Christians, speaking of being alongside the poor, vulnerable and grieving. Over the years we have heard of him giving pizza (his favourite food, I think!) to the poor and in innumerable other ways being an example to us all of what Christian service means.

24 October (30th Sunday) The healing of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)

At this point we reach Jericho, just fifteen miles from Jerusalem. Herod the Great built a winter palace at Jericho, thereby increasing its popularity. It is unclear whether the crowds were from there, or pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Apart from Jairus, Bartimaeus is the only person connected with a healing that is named in Mark. There is uncertainty about the meaning of his name but Sabin suggests it could mean 'son of the unclean'. If so, it could remind readers of so many people that were deemed unclean that were healed by Jesus.

This is the second healing of a blind man in Mark and it is worth a comparison with the earlier one in Mark 8:22-6. Whereas the first man was brought to Jesus by other people, who begged Jesus to touch him, Bartimaeus shouted out to Jesus himself and also knew who Jesus was, calling him Son of David (10:47). His shouting was the opposite of that of the unclean spirit in 5:5: Bartimaeus wanted to come to Jesus whereas the unclean spirit wanted him to go away. The disciples were terrified when Jesus walked on the water and said to them 'Take heart' (6:50) but when they used the same words to Bartimaeus he sprang up and came to Jesus (10:49-50). This blind

man said quite clearly that he wanted to see and Jesus said that it was his faith that had made him well (10:52) just as it was faith that healed the woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages (5:34). Not only was Bartimaeus healed but he followed Jesus, and his restoration of sight happened immediately (**εὐθὺς**) whereas the healing in 8:22-6 was gradual.

This is the end of a section of Mark in which three times the disciples have failed to understand that it was necessary for their Master to suffer and die. Similarly they failed to understand that Jesus in dying on the cross to save others provided them with a model of service, and that his followers must follow the way of their Master, who came not to be served but to serve (10:45). The remainder of Mark involves Jesus teaching in word and deed in Jerusalem (Mk 11-12), his apocalyptic discourses (Mk 13) and his Passion, death and resurrection (Mk 14-16) which we studied around Easter. There are only three Sundays now left in Year B; these have two short readings from Mark 12 and just 9 verses from Mark 13. In the final notes I shall comment on these and also briefly on Mark 11 and some of the omitted sections of Mark 12-13.

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