

These are the last notes for Mark. I will consider the readings for the last three Sundays of Year B as well as brief comments on the omitted sections.

We start with Mark 11 and part of Mark 12, none of which is in the Sunday readings. Passages up to 12:27 are marked * ; they are not in the current Sunday readings.

***Mark 11:1-10 Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.**

This is read during the Palm Sunday procession, so we have not heard it since Luke was read in 2019. Jesus and his disciples were not far from Jerusalem when he sent two disciples to bring a colt to him. Immediately (εὐθεὺς) is used both in 11:2 and 11:3. The request would have reminded the disciples of Zech 9:9 where the king was to come, riding on an ass. The choice in Mark of a donkey would reflect humility; the context in Zechariah is of a peace loving king. Use of the leafy branches and crying of Hosanna may be a reminder of Simon Maccabeus taking back the Temple after the Greek ruler Antiochus IV had tried to eradicate Jewish faith and had erected a statue of himself in the Temple (1 Macc 13:47-52). This is still celebrated in the annual Jewish Feast of Hanukkah. If this was Mark's intention there is some tension between the two ideas but both passages suggest a restoration of the Temple as a place of worship.

***Mark 11:12-25 The fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple**

Here we see a device used a number of times by Mark. In 11:12 Jesus went to the Temple area and what the editor calls the cleansing of the Temple is sandwiched between the two parts of the episode of the fig tree. Another example of this is the healing of the woman suffering from haemorrhages, sandwiched between the telling of the healing of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:21-43).

The first Part of 11:17 is a quotation of Is 56:7 whilst the second quotes Jer 7:11. Mark seems to be implying that, like Jeremiah, Jesus was angry at what was happening amidst all the buying and selling, but also that he looked forward to a time when foreigners would be included in the covenant. The chief priests and scribes, who were afraid of Jesus, were 'looking for a way to kill him' but the 'crowd was spellbound' (11:18). What happened to the fig tree foreshadows what will happen to the Temple – it will be destroyed; but yet the passage, with the reference to prayer at 11:24, concludes with a message of hope about answers to prayer.

*** Mark 11:27-33 Jesus' authority is questioned**

Jesus' early ministry in Galilee included five controversy stories (Mk 2:1-3:6). There are another five controversy stories and a parable here, in Jesus' early ministry in Jerusalem. This first controversy has an attempt to trap Jesus into publicly claiming divine authority for himself. But he was clever in how he responded. He indirectly implied that God was the source both of his and John the Baptist's authority; they were God's agents. This is Mark's last mention of John the Baptist. He was popular with the people. Jesus' opponents had tried to trap him on the question of his authority, but he put them in a difficult position – it would be risky for them to take up a position about John's baptism publicly!

*** Mark 12:1-17 The parable of the wicked tenants**

The vineyard as a metaphor for Israel is popular in the Old Testament. Here, Is 5:7 is recalled, where the vineyard is the house of Israel. In Mark's parable the beloved son is Jesus. He was referred to as such both at his baptism and his transfiguration. The tenant farmers are Israel's religious leaders. Mk 12:10-11 quotes Ps 118:22-3 to stress that the religious leaders made a terrible mistake in rejecting Jesus.

Sweetland uses this passage to remind us that public witness to faith in Christ has caused the death of many Christians, quoting Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero as examples. It should remind us that more Christians are dying for their faith

nowadays than ever before, but also encourage us to be bold in standing up for what we believe. Recently I was told of the negative attitude of some presenters to *Thought for the Day* on Today on BBC radio 4. I think it used to be five minutes. I timed a Christian presenter this week, and it was under two minutes. What they can say is seriously monitored. We should pray for the few brave Christians who attempt to present a thoughtful message in the midst of discussion of the national news.

*** Mark 12:13-27 Controversies with several Jewish groups**

The question about paying tax to the Emperor is another crafty one. Jews were outraged at having to use a coin bearing Caesar's likeness and saw the taxes as a burden. If Jesus said they should pay, Jews would see him as a traitor; if he told them not to pay the tax the Romans would view him as a traitor and could have arrested him for encouraging a rebellion. By asking for a denarius, Jesus exposed them to revealing that they already used Roman coins. So, he told them to give back to Caesar what was his but challenged them also to fulfil their obligations to God (12:17). A clever response! Our diocese has recently chosen our parish as a pioneer for a new project about time, talents and treasure. We might disagree with some aspects of the programme (and probably do!) but we cannot deny that we have a responsibility to support our church (and also the needy in the wider community). Let us reflect on how best we should respond not only to the needs in our parish and diocese but also more widely.

Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. Josephus said they were 'men of the highest standing' but with limited popular influence. They would be aware that Jesus sided with the Pharisees on resurrection but were fond of debating with Jewish distinguished teachers. The *Sacra Pagina* authors say that their 'question to Jesus (12:19-23) is hostile and seeks to reduce to absurdity the case for life after death'. Their question was attempting to prove a conflict between Deut 25:5-6 and Jesus' teaching. Belief in life after death was at the time something of a novelty. People sought immortality in their children, although Dan 12:2, probably written around 165BC, speaks of everlasting life and Wisdom 3:1 (often read at funerals) states 'the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God'. It goes on to speak of immortality. Jesus' words, referring to the burning bush, (Ex 3:6, 15-16) were probably more relevant to the Pharisees than to us! God could only be 'I Am' in the present tense to the patriarchs if there is an afterlife. If God can create life, we should believe he can recreate it. Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15:12f probably relates more readily to how we think today!

31 October (31st Sunday) The First Commandment (Mark 12:28-34)

The third controversy is with a scribe who asked which is the first commandment; it is more of a scholarly dialogue than a controversy. Jesus replied by first asserting that there is one God, then he quoted the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5) which was, and is, recited daily by pious Jews. He concluded with Lev 19:18b. Thus, he was combining Jewish belief in monotheism with love both of God and of neighbour. The scribe showed that he agreed with Jesus by repeating what Jesus said but adding that to love one's neighbour as oneself 'is much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices'. This is an allusion to Ps 40:6. The passage is important because here we have a scribe who has a positive attitude to Jesus, and who Jesus approves of by saying, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God' (12:34).

As I was writing this it occurred to me how often I have referred to Old Testament passages. Our understanding of the New Testament is enriched by knowledge of the Old. The more I look at the Lectionary the more respect I have for those who devised it. I am not the only one; both the Anglican church and many non conformists who use the *Common Lectionary* are effectively using our Lectionary. However, whilst on Sundays we have the Gospel, a Psalm and two other readings they often omit the Old Testament reading. Usually that is connected to, or illuminates, the Gospel; today Deut 6:2-6 links extremely well and is helpful. If you have not studied Scripture you probably know from school the Pentateuch stories about Abraham and Moses, maybe some small books like Jonah and Ruth, as well as aspects of the history with kings like David and Solomon, and prophets such as Elijah and Elisha and the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. We hear Psalms daily. There is much more! I love the minor prophets e.g. Amos, Hosea and Micah. There is a wealth to explore; maybe start by looking again at the first reading each Sunday.

7 November (32nd Sunday) Scribes and the widow in the Temple (Mk 12:38-44)

After the last controversy, with a riddle about the meaning of Messiah in 12:35-7, we have a comparison between groups of people who use the Temple. It sums up ideas on wealth and poverty. The scribes who wanted the best seats (12:39) were not unlike James and John, wanting special seats in heaven (10:37). Although the scribes wanted respect and ‘for the sake of appearance say long prayers’ people are to beware of them because they ‘devour widows’ houses’ (12:40). Probably their long robes and seeking the best seats were all part of getting the people to admire them. Perhaps as lawyers they could be trustees of the estates of widows thereby gaining for themselves a share in the estates. Their hypocrisy, insincerity in prayer and probable dishonesty would be judged severely and their behaviour was not to be copied. In contrast, people were donating money in the Temple treasury. When the rich put large sums, in copper coins, into the receptacle, they would make a noise as they dropped. Thus, like the scribes, they were drawing attention to themselves and their generosity.

Meanwhile, the widow put in two small coins. The Greek word translated as ‘penny’ is a loan word from the Latin *quadrans*. Use of Latin loan words like this would be consistent with Mark being written in Rome. By praising the action of the widow we can see that Jesus’ anger in 11:15-17 was not about money in the Temple but about those who used Temple money for themselves. Widows in Israel had no inheritance rights. The eldest son acquired property rights. Although the widow could marry her brother in law most lived alone in great poverty. This woman, in contrast to the scribes, gave all that she had to sustain the Temple. Several commentators question whether she is to be seen as a model for her generosity or to be pitied as a victim of religious exploitation. Was she too generous? Should she have decreased her contribution when her husband died? Interesting questions for reflection!! This is also another reading relevant to our time, talents and treasure project.

14 November (33rd Sunday) Coming of the Son of Man; fig tree (Mk 13:24-32)

Mark 13 is an example of a genre called Apocalyptic. There are similar passages in Matthew and Luke and examples of this type of writing in Daniel and Revelation. Mark 13 is sometimes called the *Little Apocalypse* in contrast with Revelation as the *Great Apocalypse*. Apocalypse means revelation. Such literature, common in the Middle East at this time, supposedly reveals the mysteries of the future and often arises amidst a persecuted people. Those to whom Mark wrote had probably suffered

under Nero and were warned of future persecution (13:9-13). However, they also had the hope that one day they would reign with Christ in glory.

Jewish apocalyptic was characterised by warnings of a final disaster, and some sort of battle between good and evil, along with signs of when this would happen. Peter, James, John and Andrew wanted to know when it would be (13:3-4). The following references to wars, battles and earthquakes are typical of the genre. Mark is probably writing in the light of persecution in his own time, using typical apocalyptic imagery in 13:9-13. The 'desolating sacrilege' of 13:4 would be the image of himself that Antiochus had erected in the Temple (Dan 12:11). The Temple was destroyed around the time that Mark wrote. However, he does not wholly share the perspective of apocalyptic writers. There will be suffering and events involving the sun, moon and stars, (13:24-5) but there is future hope of 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' (13:26). He does not predict a final battle between good and evil, but instead, after the suffering, there will be glory and angels to 'gather his elect' (13:27). The idea of the fig tree coming in to bloom is not apocalyptic but was seen in Jewish thought as a sign of God's kingdom.

Mark is clear that 'only the Father' (13:32) knows when that day will be and warns of the need to keep alert. He obviously thought it would be soon, but we are still here! As we conclude our reflections on Mark we know neither when the world will end nor how soon our lives will end, but death is one thing we can be sure of, so let us 'keep alert' (13:33).

I hope you have found the reflections on Mark useful. I have enjoyed researching and writing them but they have taken me very many hours! Do follow the material on godwhospeaks.uk as in Advent we start the Year of Luke.

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