

Engaging Mark's Gospel

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The task of bringing congregations to engage Mark's gospel is a challenge which rests on three basic principles. We want to take Mark seriously by seeking to understand what it meant in its day. We want to take our congregations seriously by being sensitive to their/our contexts. And we want to take seriously the way our understandings of our own context and the context of the ancient world have developed over time and in contemporary thought. This means that we cannot simply parrot what Mark says without intelligent engagement with all the problems posed by using a text written in a different culture and language and with a different world view from our own. And similarly we cannot simply pick and choose what might please, entertain, or conform to what our modern cultures prefer. And, in addition, we cannot do all this in an intellectual ghetto, not listening to the wisdom of tradition and contemporary thought and discovery.

Mark, the shortest and earliest of the four gospels and the main source of at least Matthew and Luke, calls itself "good news" or "gospel" (1:1), thus giving its name to this kind of writing. It sets its "good news" within a horizontal and vertical framework. Horizontally it relates the "good news" to the hopes and expectations of the Jewish people which were fed by their stories of past liberation and by their prophetic texts and which they were now applying to their first century plight (1:2-3). Relative poverty, exposure to the whims and exploitation of the empire, and a sense of alienation and corruption combined to evoke movements seeking radical change. The Jesus movement was one of these. Mark was written some 40 years into its history, very probably outside the cauldron of Palestine, but also espousing such hope but in ways that made sense to its context somewhere else in the empire, possibly even in Rome itself. The Jewish heritage among its members enabled them to make sense of its often subtle allusions to the biblical tradition.

Both the horizontal and the vertical dimension meet us in Mark's opening scenes. Most dramatically the heavenly and earthly realms intersect at the baptism of Jesus where God tells Jesus he is his beloved Son and bestows on him the Spirit (1:9-11). In other words, from the beginning Mark portrays the good news as a divine initiative. The Spirit is not for decoration but to enable Jesus to fulfil his task: to baptise with the Spirit. Luke relates this to the Day of Pentecost, but in Mark Jesus' ministry is a baptising with the Spirit, for in his ministry Jesus floods his world with the Spirit. What that means concretely becomes clear in what immediately follows: Jesus faces Satan in the wilderness (1:12-13). Mark's understanding of the good news is informed by a conflict model which has mythological roots. The lustful angels of Genesis 6 had impregnated women who gave birth to giants and in popular mythology, preserved in the book of 1 Enoch, these self-destructed in mutual warfare and from their corpses emerged evil spirits, like personalised viruses, to plague humanity ever since. For Mark, to proclaim the reign of God (the kingdom of God) was to announce victory of these demons, liberating those whom they held captive through illness and demon possession, but ultimately liberating all from oppressive demonic powers. We see this in the opening scene of his ministry (1:21-28) and in key episodes and controversies (3:23-30; 5:1-20).

While Mark's good news is thus enunciated within the framework of first world demonology, alien to our own understandings, its underlying notion that the good news is about liberation remains central for understanding and proclaiming the gospel today. We don't personalise viruses. Our understandings of illness, including mental illness, are vastly different. We have the advantage of

much more sophisticated analyses of what generates poverty and the role governments can play in alleviating it or perpetuating it. Nevertheless, the liberation model with its goal of freedom and its vision of life where love and compassion rule makes sense for our understanding both of what hope means today and of what our agenda is in the present. The same God, the same Spirit, brings us the same liberation from the powers which bind us within ourselves and enables us to engage in the same agenda of bringing liberation in our world.

The liberation perspective determines also Mark's understanding of what we should be doing with our biblical heritage. The conflicts in Mark 2 – 3, signalled in 1:22, make it very clear that in interpreting scripture and its laws love and liberation are the highest priority, not rules for their own sake nor strategies to protect or appease God. Thus "the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath" (2:27). Mark thus preserves the perspective of the historical Jesus who upheld biblical law on that basis. Finding himself faced with a situation which had not confronted Jesus, namely what now to do with the influx of non-Jews into the movement, Mark, like Paul before him, argued that these priorities required a permanent overriding of laws which were seen to function as barriers between Jews and non-Jews. Mark does not go so far as Paul to declare that believers are no longer under the Law. For keeping the core commandments and following Jesus' take on them is the way to eternal life (10:17-22). But Mark goes beyond Paul in arguing that some laws not only functioned as barriers, but never made sense in the first place, especially those relating to purity and food (7:14-23). Mark's creativity in celebrating the inclusion of both Jews and non-Jews is evident in the two panels of Mark 5 (the Gentile Gerasene demoniac and the girl and woman linked with the symbolic number 12) and in Mark 6 – 8, where the feeding of the 5000 with its 12 baskets leftover symbolises the gospel coming to Israel and the feeding of the 4000 with 7 baskets leftover symbolises the gospel coming to Gentiles. Today's interpreter will not have to look far to find discrimination and alienation which similarly need the gospel of love to break down the barriers which divide.

While the twin scenes of Jesus' baptism (1:9-11) and his transfiguration (9:2-8) underline Jesus' connection with God in all of this, the situation is rather different for the disciples within the story, who struggle to grasp the agenda, let alone the core values. Peter hails Jesus as the Messiah, but then fails to understand just what kind of Messiah Jesus is (8:27-33). It was not unreasonable for him to assume that the Messiah would be a winner who would lead them to splendid victory over the powers of oppression and so be hailed as king of kings in great glory. In stark contrast Jesus portrays his path as suffering and insists that true greatness is not having power over others but living a life of generosity and love (8:27-37). Mark embroils the other disciples in Peter's misconception by having them preoccupied with who among them would be the greatest (9:34-37) and by having James and John lobby Jesus for elevated positions in the messianic kingdom (10:35-40). Neither the disciples' greatness, nor Jesus' greatness, nor God's greatness is to be seen in such terms, but as greatness in love and compassion. "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45) – not: "The Son of Man came not to serve but to be served ..." (10:40-45).

Mark's treatment of the theme of greatness in chapters 8 – 10 finds its echo in the story of Jesus' crucifixion where in direct subversion of the popular notion of greatness Jesus is depicted as king of the Jews enthroned on a cross and wearing a crown of thorns. This is a direct challenge to their views, as well as being something of a parody of Rome's imperial cult which acclaimed its incumbents as sons of God. Adulation of power could easily have crept back in via the resurrection

and the tradition of Jesus' enthronement at God's right hand, proving that Peter was right after all, but that is not Mark's perspective. For all its imagery of messianic enthronement, Jesus' resurrection and exaltation in Mark, are to be understood not as God saying: no, love and lowliness are not my way, as if the life of Jesus was an exception, a stunt, but as saying: yes, this is my way and this is who I am. Not only in preaching but also in liturgy it is rather easy to fall back into line with Peter's perspectives and in our songs and prayers convey the impression that God has a constant need to be admired and adored like a monarch of old. The correlation between court ritual and cult ritual makes this a constant danger. Mark's gospel invites us to reframe our worship and rethink the good news.

It remains a strange gospel from a strange world, but, if that be given its true weight, across the distance can emerge experiences of proximity which take us right to the heart of major issues of conflict and liberation in ourselves and in our world today.

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