

“Mark” Time 10

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Mark chosen for the revised Common Lectionary for Year B, from chapter 6, but they can be used at any time of the year.

1. Mark 10:1-16 – Marriage and Family
2. Mark 10:17-31 – Money
3. Mark 10:32-45 – True Greatness
4. Mark 10:46-52 – Seeing and Not Seeing

You can do all three studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Mark, offers you a commentary which brings today’s thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other’s input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Before we start:

Meet Mark!

Like the other gospels, Mark contains no information about the author. When we move beyond what it actually says to ask when it was written and who wrote it, we are on shaky ground. Mark was probably written about 40 years after the death of Jesus, so around 70 CE. Fifty years after it was written a church leader in Greece, called Papias, is reported to have claimed that the gospel was written by Mark and that Mark was Peter’s interpreter. Papias wrote about the other gospels, too, but unfortunately some of his information seems to be unreliable. The problem with the claim that Mark was Peter’s interpreter is that other gospels tell us things about Peter which differ from what Mark says. There was a tendency to make claims about the authority of the gospels by linking their

authorship to key figures at the beginning of the Christian movement and perhaps that accounts for why we have the reference to Peter. While there was a John Mark who played a minor role in the beginning of the movement, the name Mark was very common – like the name “John” today.

Perhaps it was someone called Mark who wrote the gospel. We simply cannot know.

What we do have is the gospel itself, so that is our starting point.

For further information about Mark, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/mark.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher.

Mark 10:1-16 – Marriage and Family

Divorce had become a problem in Jesus' day. Jewish society had been in transition for a century or two as more religious teachers moved away from the traditional view that a man could have more than one wife. Greek and Roman society insisted on monogamy: one husband, one wife. Genesis gives us stories about Abraham and Jacob having more than one wife. Solomon, notoriously, had hundreds! Sixty years after Jesus, Josephus, the Jewish historian still defended the practice. It was a male oriented society so discussions focussed mainly on what a man might be allowed to do, often with minimal regard for women.

What polygyny (having more than one wife) meant in practice was that if the relationship between a man and his wife broke down, he could marry another. He might then one day fall in love again with his first wife. You solved marital problems not by subtraction (divorce) but by addition. Once people began to move away from having more than one wife to the belief that one should have only one, a problem arose about what to do if the relationship broke down. The only option was divorce.

Thus divorce became more common, which then raised the question: what justifies divorce? It was usually the pattern in those male dominated societies that the man initiated the divorce. It was relatively simple. In Jewish society the man wrote a certificate of divorce, which among other things stated that the woman was free to marry again. He gave it to her. Most women remarried. Some returned to their families. Some were destined for poverty. Some tried to make ends meet by finding work for themselves, including prostitution. Marriage contracts usually had a clause where, should the man divorce his wife, he had to repay the dowry he had received from his wife's family when they married.

There were few rules. One was that the man was not allowed to remarry his divorced wife because she would have slept with another man. Sleeping with another partner automatically excluded you from being with your original partner except for very unusual circumstances when for instance a woman had been raped as a prisoner of war. In biblical law, where adultery had taken place, both partners were to be executed. When Jewish society came under Roman law, such executions were forbidden. The alternative was divorce. In fact, as in Greek and Roman Law, divorce became compulsory if adultery had taken place. The Roman Emperor Augustus even tried to tighten up this requirement by ruling that people could be prosecuted if they did not divorce. There was no room for forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is all background for understanding our passage, where some Pharisees ask for Jesus' opinion about divorce. It was a troubling issue because some men were divorcing their wives for quite trivial reasons like their cooking.

Jesus steers against this trend by using the Genesis creation story to state that divorce was never intended to happen. God meant people to come together for life. No one should break up marriages. How can humans think they have the right to undo what God has done? Hence his response, literally, was: “What God has joined together let no human being separate” (10:9).



In Mark’s world women could sometimes initiate divorce. So Mark then has Jesus state the prohibition in plain language as it applied to both men and women (10:11-12). Marriages are permanent so anyone marrying another and so sleeping with another is committing adultery. The exception would be where adultery had taken place. Then, of course, they must divorce. When Matthew takes up this passage from Mark, he makes that explicit: no divorcing “except for adultery” when by law you had to divorce (19:9).

The prohibition of adultery created problems. What if there was abuse in a marriage? What if a partner who was not a follower of Jesus wanted out of the relationship. Paul faced this situation in Corinth and did not apply the prohibition in those cases (1 Cor 7:10-16). It was OK to divorce. At the heart of Jesus’ teaching was compassion: what is the most compassionate thing to do? Or was Jesus’ rule an inflexible one? Paul makes compassion the criterion.

In reality the more compassionate resolution in some circumstances is for the marriage to end. Those who stick rigidly to Jesus’ prohibition as a permanent rule then try to get around it by finding some way to prove that it was not a real marriage in the first place. Most, however, recognise, like Paul, that compassion must be the main rule. That will sometimes mean divorce. It will also mean that there can be reconciliation in a marriage where adultery has taken place and with counselling a whole range of matters which have damaged the relationship can be dealt with.

After marriage and divorce Mark brings another household matter: children (10:13-16). The disciples seem to be like some in our churches who see children as a distraction. Gone are the days when people would often say that children are best seen but not heard. They are also part of God’s creation and belong in the church family. In the previous chapter Mark had Jesus treat a child as a model of simplicity and openness and warn against child abuse (9:36-37, 42), as much a problem in those days as in our own. In Jesus’ day children were generally not given the prominence they receive in our own. The response of the disciples would have seemed fairly normal. Jesus’ response was then more unusual than it might seem to us.



In our day we will want to make connections between the two parts of our passage. Marriage is fundamental for the raising of families and for that purpose healthy marriages are so important. Good parenting is not guaranteed, whether by a man and a woman or two women or two men or a single parent. Parents need our support. Families need our support.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is your experience directly or indirectly of people facing breakdown of marriage and how would you reflect on it in the light of today's passage?
3. Is your community a good place for children to be? Why or why not?

Mark 10:17-31 – Money

Both Matthew and Luke copy Mark's story of the rich man who approaches Jesus and both enhance the story. Luke makes the man a ruler and trims away some of Mark's detail and omits "Do not defraud", probably because it is not one of the ten commandments. Matthew does this, too, but then adds: "And you shall love your neighbour as yourself".

More dramatically Matthew rejigs the story, omitting the man's comments that he has kept the commandments since his youth because Matthew makes him into a young man. This is playful on Matthew's part because he also adds some words to Jesus in the exchange, so that Jesus says, "If you want to be grown up" often translated "If you want to be perfect". The word for "perfect" is also the word for "grown up" or "mature", so Matthew's message is: grow up!

The story in Mark is one of a number where Jesus challenges someone to sell up, give their wealth to the poor, and join him on the road. Peter and Andrew had done so, as had James and John, and a little later, Levi. Jesus sometimes called people to do this and sometimes told people to stay put. Whether literally on the road with Jesus and his group or staying at home, the call was to follow Jesus and that meant to follow his way of understanding the meaning scripture and the commandments.

This is a simple story told to challenge the rich about their priorities. In the dialogue with the disciples which follows we see that Jesus was very aware of how possessions can possess people, preventing them from being generous. You cannot be part of good news for the poor if you are bent on accumulating wealth for yourself.



It is not that everyone who followed Jesus sold up. Having followers who could offer funding and hospitality was crucial for the mission of Jesus and for the church as it expanded. It was all a matter of priorities. Matthew's version underlines that it is about having a mature approach to possessions and his addition, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" is the key.

Jesus challenges the power of families to protect their own at the expense of others. Calling some people to abandon families and hit the road was a kind of dramatic protest movement against family power. When the protective interests of family and wealth reign, some people are going to be left behind. It was happening in the world of the first century and it has been happening even more dramatically in the twenty-first century. In our day it may be family power or simply the power of those who have accumulated huge amounts of wealth especially since the global financial crisis. Wealth is being increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few while for the vast majority at the other end there is poverty.

To inherit or obtain eternal life means to enjoy God's life, not just in the future but now, and that means engaging with God's life and love in the here and now to bring change and hope. Keeping commandments, making statements of faith, singing songs and hymns of praise count for nothing, if they lack this one thing. When we are not good news for the poor, our religion is in effect making the situation worse.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. How is it possible to be good news for the poor when you have wealth and have not left all behind like some of the disciples were challenged to do?
3. Is your community of faith good news for the poor?

Mark 10:32-45 – True Greatness

This is the third occasion where Mark brings Jesus' prediction that he is to suffer and die in Jerusalem before then rising from the dead. The first was when Peter told him off because Messiahs were not meant to fail, but succeed (8:29-33). The second was just before Jesus caught the disciples arguing about who among them would be the greatest (9:30-33). Mark loves doing things in threes and this third occasion is similarly contrasted with the failure of the Jesus' disciples.

James and John want top spots when Jesus succeeds as Messiah and sets up his kingdom. Peter and James and John belonged to the inner circle of Jesus' disciples according to Mark. How could they get it so wrong? Some have suggested that Mark is writing in a part of the early Christian movement which had come to resent the leadership being offered by these disciples and so paints them in a bad light. More likely Mark paints the disciples as being particularly out of touch with Jesus in order to challenge disciples, including leaders, of his own day. It applies just as much today.

What is greatness? From an early age we can learn that it means getting your own way and making sure no one else stands in your way. You get your own way by getting others to respect and admire you or by getting control over them. To be great is then to get what you want. That can be wealth. It can also be influence and power over others. James and John are not atypical. They expected Jesus to share that ambition and wanted a part of it. It was also how they will have thought about God. "God", when made in the image of such ambitious human beings, likes most of all having all power, having everyone's admiration, and being in control.

Domitian, emperor in Mark's time



Many times what we sing and say seems to reflect that view. What we most admire or value in God is what we most value in ourselves and what we most value in ourselves is what we most value and admire in God – mutual reinforcement. Mark is telling us that Jesus rejects that as a model for himself and rejects it as a model for his disciples. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (10:45). He contrasts it with what he observes in the world of power of his day where people's "rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (10:42).

In place of this human projection of self-centredness onto himself and onto God, Jesus talks about serving. That doesn't mean being a doormat. It means making love the focus. Love can be comforting but also confronting. Jesus' ambition was to reach out in compassion to those around him. He measured greatness by compassion not by how much one could be admired and be in control. It made him vulnerable. That was what he was trying to teach his followers.

It is clear that Jesus not only thought this way about his followers and about himself. He also thought this way about God. God is not just a bigger version of a human being wanting to be the centre of

everything and be adored forever. God is the creator who refused to take up the whole space and set free the universe to develop and evolve. God is the one who loves, just as any good parents love and care for their children. Jesus' parable of the prodigal Son appeals to what it is natural for parents to do: to love and care for their children. God is love. That's what we see in Christ and what he challenges his followers to make their ambition. Measure greatness not by how much you can get your own way at the expense of others, but how much you embrace love – for others, for yourself and for God.

This can all unravel if we don't see God as like Jesus. Then we could rewrite the story so that the loving which Jesus showed was a temporary thing. His resurrection got him back to where he really wanted to be: on a throne beside God, just like James and John wanted to be on thrones next to him. Their only fault was timing. Jesus would succeed and they would get their rewards once Jesus has passed through the test of facing suffering: from hardship to glory! Peter was right after all. He just needed to see that Jesus' lowliness was short term.

The message of Easter is not at all that God got Jesus back onto the winner's podium and could now leave loving vulnerability behind. Rather it is that God was in effect saying: Jesus really did reveal the way I am and my priorities. Jesus really was the revelation of what God is like.

It is possible to reverse Jesus' saying with which our passage ends so that it reads: "The Son of Man came not to serve, but to be served" and, one could add, "to give his life as an example for many". Instead it says: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." "Ransom" is an image of what sets people taken captive free. Jesus' life and death had such liberation as its goal. For some that will include liberating them from their images of God, their images of Jesus, and also their images of themselves so that they can recover what it truly means to be great and good.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. "What we most admire or value in God is what we most value in ourselves and what we most value in ourselves is what we most value and admire in God – mutual reinforcement." What values do you see being reinforced in your community?
3. "The Son of Man came not to serve but to be served and give his life as an example for many." What is wrong with this and why?

Mark 10:46-52 – Seeing and Not Seeing

This story needs to be read in the light of its wider context. Mark has had Jesus on three occasions indicate that he was going to Jerusalem and would there face suffering the death. The third of those was in the previous Study. As we saw, associated with each time Jesus says this, is a depiction of the disciples as being blind to what Jesus was saying and instead being preoccupied with power.

Mark often uses stories for symbolic purposes. So, having shown up the disciples as blind, he has Jesus heal a blind man! In fact he does so not only here, but also before this group of three failures on the part of the disciples. Thus in 8:22-26 he places the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, immediately before the first passage which shows Peter up as blind. There is more: in the passage that comes just before the healing at Bethsaida, Mark actually has Jesus confront the disciples as being blind and deaf (8:14-20) because they failed to see the meaning of the symbolism of 12 baskets and 7 baskets in the feedings of the 5000 and 4000, as indicating good news for both Jews and for non-Jews.

Gospel writers often used stories symbolically and sometimes exercised considerable freedom and creativity. Thus when Matthew comes to this part of Mark, he does two remarkable things. First, he turns the healing of Bartimaeus into the healing of two men, not just one, and so drops the name. And second, he uses the story twice. He has it where Mark has it, but also adds it into his sample list of Jesus' actions in chapters 8 and 9, which follow his collection of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 – 7. So we find the same story in 9:27-31. Why? In Jewish thought two witnesses constitute reliable evidence. This is playful to make a serious point.

Back to Mark, it is typical that people who should know miss the point about Jesus and people who you least expect to, get what he is about. This is deliberately subversive as well as reflecting what actually happened in many instances and still does. Here we are not told what Jesus did to heal the man. It is simply assumed that he could and did, especially because the man believed he could. Bartimaeus is a beggar. Anyone with a serious disability was likely to need to end up begging. There was no social welfare support system. The assumption in the story is that people knew that Jesus was good news for the poor.

Bartimaeus knows this and so calls out for help. It is rather typical that people want to shut him up and see him as an annoying distraction. With the children it was the disciples. Here it is the crowd. Thank goodness, Bartimaeus was not put off. He addressed Jesus as "the Son of David". That is one of the titles used of the Messiah, who would be like David and be a descendant of David. Bartimaeus knows that Jesus is not the kind of Messiah Peter and James and John were thinking of, but someone who was good news for the poor. He cared. Love was what drove him.

Not the disciples, but Bartimaeus, the beggar, becomes the model of the true disciple. The scene is set for what follows in the final chapters of Mark where we find very confused notions of messiahship. Lowly, riding on a donkey – yes, lowly. Acclaimed by the crowd? Yes, but how reliable was that? People sing songs about the Christ often without really understanding who he is.

It all turns very sour when being the Messiah, the Christ, becomes an accusation, which finally has him dressed as a messianic king and ridiculed and then, wearing a crown of thorns, hoisted onto a cross, a brutal throne. For he was being sentenced for wanting to be a Messiah, a “King of the Jews”, as the charge above him read. Pilate was persuaded that he should be eliminated along with all the others who challenged Rome’s claims to be the ones who should be in power.

Pilate got it wrong and yet Mark wants us to see that unwittingly he also got it right. Jesus was the Messiah, but a very different Messiah, the Messiah Bartimaeus looked up to. A broken body on a cross became a defiant statement, an affront to the values of Rome, but also to the disciples. This brokenness became the source of deep spiritual nourishment as Jesus’ followers recovered its meaning and shared in its communion.



For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is your experience, directly or indirectly, of being a person living with disability?
3. “The body of Christ broken for you” – how does Holy Communion connect to what Mark has done by contrasting the disciples with Bartimaeus?