

“Mark” Time 6

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 6:1-13 – Home Support?
2. Mark 6:14-29 – Abuse and Execution
3. Mark 6:30-56 – Sensational or Symbolic?

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>

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Session One

Mark 6:1-13 – No fans at home

Not all communities and families are unsupportive when talent arises among them, but some are. “We’ll cut him down to size!” – or “her”. It’s sometimes like saying: “Don’t rock the boat! We don’t want anything to change.” Or it can be that people see a threat to their power and authority. Or simply, that people have low expectations of their own.

So it is not difficult to identify with Jesus and with his community and family in this story. We may well have seen or experienced these responses ourselves. In Mark 6 the story echoes what happened in chapter 3, where we already had reference to Jesus’ family. Here we find them again: his mother, sisters, and brothers, James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, figures who later became prominent in the church. No mention of Joseph, the father? Perhaps he had died. Matthew and Luke suggest he wasn’t the real father, but that would be no reason for him to be absent. As in chapter 3 we hear in our reading that Jesus’ family also could not accept him. That was clear in chapter 3 and is implied here in the words: “Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (6:4).

Matthew and Luke have added legends about Jesus’ birth which would make this statement rather awkward. Matthew keeps it, but Luke leaves out the reference to “house”, probably because he sensed the problem. Indeed, Luke takes the scene from where it comes in Mark and transfers it back to become the opening scene of Jesus’ ministry (4:16-30). He also elaborates it so that it now serves as an introduction to Jesus’ mission as a whole. He has Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and apply it to himself: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon and he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (4:18-21).

Mark has the crowd refer to Jesus as a “carpenter” (6:3), which Matthew modifies to make him only the “son of a carpenter” (13:55). It is likely that Jesus would have followed his father’s craft. The word translated as “carpenter” means something wider than what we understand as carpentry. They were most likely both builders in the broad sense. This is one of the few pieces of information we have about what Jesus might have done in the previous 15 years of his life.

Just 6.5 km kilometers away from Nazareth where Jesus’ family lived was a fairly large town called Sepphoris where there had been a revolt against the Roman administration in the unrest following Herod the Great’s death in 4 BCE. It was quashed and much of the town destroyed, but under Herod Antipas, Herod’s son, who succeeded him in the area, it was being rebuilt. One cannot know for sure, but it is likely that it was here that Joseph and his son, Jesus, found work as builders.

Nazareth looking from Sepphoris



If there is historical reality behind the encounter depicted in our reading, then it indicates that whether Jesus could succeed as a healer depended very much on whether people believed he could actually heal them. In other words he was a genuine faith healer. Many cultures have stories about faith healers. Jesus will have used many of the methods of other such healers of his day, including, as this passage tells us, anointing people with oil. In other passages we read of mixing substances and applying them. While getting to the truth of what happened or happens is often difficult because of human tendencies to exaggerate and fabricate stories about their heroes, behind the mist of confusion there seems to be enough evidence to point to Jesus as someone who was believed to have done such things.

Jesus was not a loner. Nor was he the kind of leader who enjoyed the indulgence of being surrounded by admiring followers. He had a mission and he shared it with his disciples. That was after all why he challenged them to join him. According to Mark's account he sent them out to do what he was doing (6:7-13). Just as when they were with Jesus they were dependent on hospitality and support from locals wherever they travelled as a group, the same applied to when they went out in pairs.

We know of other such travelling teachers, living simply, carrying a bare minimum to help them survive. Jesus was adapting a practice of some others of his day, such as the travelling teachers linked with the Dead Sea Scrolls. It worked. The expectation was that as they went from village to village they would find households who could put them up for the night and feed them. It wouldn't have worked if everyone was desperately poor. They were certainly poor by our standards, but locals were generous and one didn't need much to survive. They had enough to make the strategy work. The instructions in the Sermon on the Mount about not worrying what one should eat or wear, but just trusting like the birds or the lilies of the field (6:25-34), applied to such people.

The pattern of going out in pairs seems to have been well established at an early stage. We later read of pairs, such as Paul and Barnabas, and later, Paul and Silas. Moving out into the wider world meant they had to adapt the rules. Dangers on the road from wild animals meant that you might need a sword or two, as Jesus' final instructions advise in Luke (22:35-38). Paul found he needed to work part time at his former trade as a tentmaker to make ends meet and then found himself criticised because of some who took Jesus' original instructions as inflexible rules for all time and accused Paul of lack of faith (1 Cor 9:11-18).

Travelling preachers and teachers were not unknown, but they often found themselves in trouble. There are many stories of teachers who exploited those groups and households that gave them hospitality. There were teachers who made false claims about their origins and authority. In Paul's letters we read of the practice of carrying written references. Some were forever asking for money. When Paul started a collection to help the poor facing famine in Judea in the 50s, it was inevitable that some thought he was just another one of those swindlers feathering his own nest. The advice in our passage that they stay in the one place is probably to avoid giving the impression that they were exploiting people to get the best benefit.

The other side of the coin was that sometimes you would not find hospitality where you might expect it. The famous instruction to shake the dust off your feet was partly saying: don't get into

arguments about hospitality. If people refuse you, accept it. Clearly the passage sees shaking the dust off one's feet as a little more than that. It is an act of judgement. Was that really necessary? They must have thought so. We might see this differently and would want to avoid any indication that we are writing people off.

The brief Jesus gave was clear: do what I do. Bring healing, liberate people from the powers that oppress them. How they did that and how we might do it may be very different, but the vision of bringing hope and restoration is the same.

Matthew embroiders the account a little in a way that makes the connection between Jesus, his disciples and John the Baptist very clear. Mark summarises Jesus' message as: "Change/repent for the kingdom of God is at hand!" (1:14-15). Matthew uses this as a summary also of John's and the disciples' preaching: "Change/repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", using exactly the same formulation each time (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). Thus he adds it into his version of our passage (10:7) and in addition has Jesus restrict where the disciples should go. Like himself, they should go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not to the Samaritans or the wider Gentile world (10:5-6; 15:24), because Matthew knows that that expansion happened only after Jesus' death.

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 of people's unwillingness to recognise ability and achievement?
3. What does doing what Jesus did look like today – in your world?

Mark 6:14-29 – John the Baptist

The “King Herod” here is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Antipas didn’t actually carry the title of “king” like his father. Mark may not have known this. Antipas inherited the territory of his father around Galilee and to the east of the Jordan River. Herod the Great had a number of wives and many children. Some of them he executed but some survived, including Antipas and his half brother Herod Philip. Herod Philip had married his niece, Herodias, who was also Antipas’s niece. While staying with Herod Philip on his way to Rome, Antipas and Herodias had struck up a friendship. It became serious and led to Antipas divorcing his wife and Herodias divorcing from Herod Philip, so that she and Herod Antipas could marry.

Just imagine the gossip columns if they had newspapers, not to speak of the TV coverage! The move got Antipas into serious trouble with Aretas, king of Petra, his father-in-law, because Antipas’ first wife was his daughter. Aretas inflicted a heavy defeat on Antipas’ forces. It also raised the ire of many Jews. Some objected to men marrying their nieces as incest on the basis that Leviticus forbids women marrying their nephews. They were a minority. Others disapproved of the divorces. We know there were controversies about what justified divorce. Perhaps this influenced Jesus’ stance on the matter.

Mark tells us that John the Baptist criticised Antipas for marrying the divorced wife of his brother on the basis that it was incest to sleep with your brother’s wife. That was a very strict application of the biblical law, given that Herod Philip was only his half brother. We must assume that Jesus would have supported John in this. Such rules no longer apply in Australian society where there is no law against marrying the divorced wife of one’s brother.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, who provides most of our information about Herod and his extended family and reports John the Baptist’s execution, suggests that Antipas disliked John for other reasons. He saw John as a threat because John challenged Antipas’ authority – as of course did Jesus, who would also face execution for the same reason.

Mark starts his account by saying that Jesus worried Antipas because Antipas feared that in Jesus John’s spirit was seeking revenge or the like. Only Luke suggests that Antipas had a hand in Jesus’ execution. Mark does not. Instead he tells the bizarre story about how Antipas killed John. Herodias’ daughter, who we know from elsewhere was called Salome, dances before Antipas and he is so “wowed” by her that he offers to do her a favour. Advised by her mother, she asks for John’s head on a platter! It is a storyteller’s delight.

When we consider more closely what the story is telling us, we see some more seriously disturbing features. Salome has to leave the space and go to another room to consult her mother. Why? Because the respectable women would not be present while the “boys” had their entertainment. What kind of dance was this? Fantasy retellings of later times which immortalise it as seductive are probably right. So, accused of incest in his marrying her mother, Antipas is engaging in a kind of

incest or incestuous sexual exploitation with his step daughter. Such was his power, the power of the abuser.

The tale contains items typical of such stories, such as having a befuddled monarch prepared to give away half his kingdom, and then caving in to demands for decapitation. The story will have circulated for a while before it reached Mark. This accounts for some of the inaccuracies in Mark's story such as calling Antipas a king and mixing up Herod Philip with the other brother also called Philip who ruled the neighbouring territory. Its storytellers may well have been also softening Antipas' brutal image. It would be typical to blame women and women's sexuality. How pathetic.

John and Jesus were close. Both were lifting people's hopes and promising change. Both would have been uncomfortable for those in power. Both set no limits to whom God will accept. John challenged people to submit to God, letting themselves be immersed in the Jordan River, an invitation for all, cleansing for all. Jesus called people to repent, to turn their lives in the direction of God and God's radical love. They did it differently, but with the same intent, with John more addressing society from outside and Jesus entering everyday life with his message. It was daring and dangerous.



For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Where do you see sexual predation happening today and what can be done about it?
3. What is your experience of cultural assumptions about women which need challenging?

Mark 6:30-56 – Sensational or Symbolic?

Our passage starts with the disciples returning from their adventures, having gone out in pairs to do what Jesus was doing: bringing help and healing. Take a rest! Don't wear yourselves out! Good advice we always need to hear. In Mark's story it is probably more than that. There was a long tradition of seeing the desert or the outback or just going bush as a place not only for rest but also for renewal. Another place to go is up a mountain, as Jesus did a little later on in the passage.

The move to withdraw had limited success because the crowds saw them in the boat and were there to meet them when they landed. Mark often mentions Jesus' popularity. On one occasion it meant that some could not get access to him so made a hole in the roof to lower a paralysed man down to him (2:1-4). Compassion drives Jesus, in healing and in teaching. The image of the people as sheep without a shepherd had been used before by the prophets as a description of Israel.

Where this passage occurs in the Revised Common Lectionary it skips across to the end of the chapter leaving out the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus' walking on the sea. The feeding of the 5000 stands in contrast to the birthday feast for Herod Antipas, which ended in John the Baptist's execution.

The story of the feeding is rich in symbolism, which people hearing the story with a Jewish background would immediately recognise. 12 baskets: there were 12 tribes. 5 loaves: probably alluding to the first 5 books of the Old Testament, called the 5 books of Moses, Genesis through to Deuteronomy. Perhaps the 5 in 5000 is saying the same thing. Setting people out in groups of 100s and 50s: that was how Israel was organised in the wilderness. A miraculous supply of food in the wilderness: recalling the miracle of Israel's being fed with manna in the desert. Bread was also a common symbol of what was good and especially of God's gift of love and wisdom. This is a highly symbolic story.



The symbolism is confirmed when we see how Mark handles the story in the wider context of his writing. He uses the feeding of the 5000 to symbolise the gospel coming to Israel and, of course, it happens in Jewish territory. He then uses the feeding of the 4000 which occurs in Gentile territory to symbolise the gospel coming to Gentiles. Again, people of his day knew how numbers worked: 7 baskets because 7 was seen as complete or universal; 4 in 4000, most likely reflecting the 4 directions, north, south, east and west. Between the two feedings Mark brings Jesus' teaching which

sets aside those laws which had been experienced as a barrier between Jews and Gentiles, discriminating against the latter.

The symbolism in the feeding of the 5000 inspired further elaboration as the story was retold. Most famously in John's Gospel it forms the starting point for a dialogue and discourse in which Jesus is portrayed as describing himself as not only the giver of true bread, but as being the living bread himself, and then promising that in future people would eat this bread, an allusion to Holy Communion.

People in the ancient world were more prepared to believe in such miracles than people in our own day. Elisha is said to have miraculously fed 200 people. Even so, it is clear that the gospel writers were unhappy about those who focussed too much on the miraculous and missed the main message of Jesus about compassion. In John's account of the feeding of the 5000, people who were taken by Jesus' miracles wanted to make Jesus king, but John has Jesus reject their attempts, just as on an earlier occasion where he reports that many believed in his name because of his miracles (2:23-25). As John puts it pointedly, Jesus did not believe in them. Nicodemus in chapter three becomes a spokesman for this kind of faith and is told he needs to be born anew if he really wants to see the kingdom of God that Jesus is representing (3:1-3).

Some people will still have no difficulties believing that Jesus multiplied bread and walked on water. Walking on water is another highly symbolic story. Like the stilling of the storm, it is meant to show Jesus' power over the deep, symbolising he forces of evil. Jesus belongs then to a kind of golden age of the miraculous and the miracles served as proofs of Jesus' power and served Christian propaganda. They have no relevance for the present beyond that, because we know that magical multiplication of food simply does not happen and people cannot walk on water. Many tragedies could be averted if only we could do such things, but we cannot, and for many, such stories have more to do with exaggerated fantasies than with reality. Their value now as then is best seen in their elaborate symbolism, which may even have created them in the first place.

Part of Mark's storytelling is to depict the disciples as rather dull and lacking in perception. For Mark that means that they should have understood that Jesus could walk on water. Mark's image of Jesus tends at times towards the magical and we see this in the final summary which has people healed just by touching Jesus' clothes, a motif found in the previous chapter when the woman with the haemorrhage touches Jesus' coat. Such bizarre practices appear also in the Book of Acts where handkerchiefs belonging to key apostles carry magical power. To be a follower of Jesus in today's world does not mean one needs to believe such things. There was always something much more significant and relevant in the gospel.

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 of faith appealing to miracles to win adherence?
3. What symbols in these stories work for you and your faith?