

“Mark” Time 789

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Mark chosen for the revised Common Lectionary for Year B, from chapters 7 - 9, but they can be used at any time of the year.

1. Mark 7:1-23 – Setting New Priorities
2. Mark 7:24-30 – Crossing Boundaries
3. Mark 8:27-38 – Getting it Right, Getting it Wrong
4. Mark 9:30-37 – Who is the Greatest?

You can do all four 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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Mark 7:1-23 – Setting New Priorities

We don't live in a world of such scruples, but they did. We have some scruples such as what clothes to wear when (why do ties matter?), covering the mouth when yawning, not to speak of all those norms and fashions which define what is "cool" or "uncool".

For some in Jesus' day there were scruples of a more serious nature. They related to keeping oneself protected from any contamination which would prevent one from entering holy space, the temple or even holy spaces and times of prayer in daily life. Some went to great lengths to avoid such impurities. Impurities were not sinful. They were part of life, such as being unclean after childbirth or during menstruation or after needing to touch a corpse or after ejaculation of semen.

You just had to make choices about what was appropriate when. Paul, for instance, mentions that some couples may refrain from sexual intercourse for a period in order to devote themselves to prayer (1 Cor 7:5). He has nothing against sex. In fact he advises people not to refrain for too long, but his assumption was that to enter the holy space of prayer you needed to be clean. The natural act of emitting semen rendered a person unclean for a time – ritually unclean not morally unclean.

Rich houses had their own immersion baths for purification. People dealt with impurities by ritual washing, as Mark explains (7:3-4). Food and liquid could bring contamination, especially if it had been in contact with sources that were unclean or with foods considered unclean in themselves, such as pork. The Old Testament, in particular in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, provides instruction about what counts as clean or unclean and what one should do about it and who, like priests, should be giving it particular attention.



Some people, such as members of the Pharisee movement, were keen to be in a state of purity as much as possible, and sometimes went overboard in insisting on protecting themselves from contamination. The dispute which lies behind our passage arose because some were going beyond what biblical law required and insisting that the truly devout like themselves should ritually cleanse the hands before eating, just in case they have anything on them which would make their food and drink unclean. We wash hands before meals to protect ourselves from germs. This was something different.

They objected to the fact that Jesus' disciples (and presumably Jesus, himself) were not being as careful when eating as they were (7:5). The responses are quite sharp (7:6-8). Mark portrays Jesus as not only distancing from their stance, but also challenging it as failing to respond at depth to God

and instead being fussy with superficial religious observances. He also challenges their alleged manipulation of biblical law to avoid responsibility towards parents (7:9-13).

His main response, possibly Jesus' original and only response, comes in a form we often meet elsewhere in stories of conflict between Jesus and his religious contemporaries. That form is usually a pithy remark, often in two parts as here: "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (7:15). There is an element of toilet humour in this. It is like saying: "What stinks is not what goes into people but what comes out of them." The supporting arguments speak directly of what goes into the toilet (7:17-23).

Probably on the lips of Jesus the saying originally meant: "It's not so much what you eat that makes you unclean, but what comes out of you." In other words Jesus was shifting the emphasis from the external observances to the inner attitudes and the actions which flowed from them. Proper ethical behaviour, love and compassion for others, is what matters most. The prophet Hosea claims to speak for God when he says: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (6:6). That did not mean abandoning the sacrificial system, but it did make God's priorities clear. This was a common theme in the prophets and we find it also in the psalms.

In Mark, however, Jesus' statement takes on new meaning because concern about clean and unclean came to play a major role as the Christian movement reached out into the non-Jewish world. While it was acceptable for Jews occasionally to share meals with Gentiles and enter their houses, it was not deemed acceptable to do so on a regular basis. Jesus, for instance, heals the few Gentiles he encounters only from a distance, never entering their houses. The next session illustrates this.

The best known incident where the conflict arose happened in Syrian Antioch. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians of a situation where he and his companion, Barnabas, but also Peter, used to share regularly in meals with the new believers there (Gal 2:11-14). That meant eating regularly with Gentiles. That changed, however, when believers linked with the church in Jerusalem run by Jesus' brother, James, came to Antioch. They held to their congregation's stricter approach and so disapproved of what was happening in Antioch.

Under such pressure Peter and even Barnabas, Paul's companion, withdrew from regular fellowship meals, but Paul insisted that imposing such restrictions ran contrary to the heart of the gospel which was about love for Jew and Gentile alike without discrimination. Laws which discriminated, even if they were biblical ones, must be set aside. That had been the agreement in relation to the requirement in Genesis 18 that Gentiles be circumcised if they are to belong to God's people. Paul was surely right.



Accordingly, Mark now reads Jesus' words in a way that sets such laws aside. He writes: "Thus he declared all foods clean" (7:19). The arguments which accompany Jesus' words in Mark now reinforce this. Food simply goes into the stomach and out into the toilet (what's left over) (7:18-19). In other words, food laws never made sense anyway. This is quite radical, but it represents an approach to scripture which is not fundamentalist where everything is believed uncritically, but one which assesses the validity of what is there in the light of the heart of the gospel and the current state of understanding. It is then prepared to set those commandments aside which belong more to cultural norms of the time which we no longer share.

It is interesting that Mark takes this approach, whereas Matthew, when using this passage from Mark, re-edits it so that it rejects only the tradition about washing hands, not any part of biblical law (15:1-13). Luke leaves this passage out altogether, but has something to say about the issue in Acts, where Peter is told in a vision not to see any creature of God's creation as unclean, but then applies it only to Gentiles not being unclean not to food laws (Acts 10:9-23). Both Matthew and Luke follow a more conservative approach to scripture which insists that not a stroke of the biblical law is to be set aside (Matt 5:18; Luke 16:17). So Mark and Paul (also John) have a different approach. Even in those days there was room for difference and debate about how best to approach scripture. There is room for both approaches in the New Testament – and so also in the church.

This passage effectively dismisses what was one of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles mixing. Mark has placed it strategically between the feeding of the 5000 chapter 6 and the feeding of the 4000 in chapter 8, which symbolise the bread of the gospel being made available to both Israel and the Gentiles. The feeding of the 5000 is replete with symbolism of Israel: in Jewish territory; 12 baskets full left over (12 tribes); people arranged in groups like Israel in the wilderness; 5 loaves like 5 books of Moses and 5 in 5000 similarly. The feeding of the 4000 is similarly symbolic: in Gentile territory, 4000 pointing in all 4 directions; 7 baskets, because they saw 7 as the perfect, universal number. Thus Mark's careful composition shows that Jesus' teaching dismantles the barrier. Nothing must stand in the way of the gospel of love for all, not even if the discrimination has biblical roots.

The passage illustrates a way of listening to the teaching of Jesus. Originally Jesus almost certainly meant: attitudes of the heart and the actions which flow from them are more important than keeping food laws. He didn't set the latter aside, as Matthew and Luke know. But the church found itself in new situations where such food laws would permanently divide and so on the basis of the love which was the heart of Jesus' teaching ruled that these food laws were not just less important but, like circumcision, were to be set aside. It is this kind of approach to the heart of Jesus' teaching which also has led to setting aside the prohibition of divorce in some instances, even though Jesus taught it. Always the heart of the gospel and what makes whole must have precedence.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. While we don't have purity rules like theirs, we sometimes have had and have our own: what is your experience?
3. Setting some biblical commands can be challenging and needs special care. How do you decide or is it just a matter of what is convenient for us?

Mark 7:24-30 – Crossing Boundaries

Mark places this story directly after his account of Jesus' teaching which Mark saw as dismantling the barrier that discriminated against Gentiles. It illustrates that move, but it is a risky story which has Jesus start from a position of prejudice and move to one of openness. Is this the art of the storyteller or a reflection of something Jesus actually had to experience? Might the prejudice have been what he learned from his family who seem to have been quite conservative, judging by their choice of all biblical names for their children? In the encounter with the leper in 1:40-45 Jesus shows a similar recoil at the leper's approach, who as an unclean person should not have approached him. Or are these stories more about the changes which disciples needed to make than about Jesus' own stances?

The assumptions in our story are clear. You do not enter the house of a Gentile. So the healing happens from a distance. We see the same remote healing in the story of the healing of the slave of the Gentile centurion (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). The storyteller has Jesus speak of Jews as children and Gentiles as dogs (Mark 7:27). "Dogs" is not a term of affection, but insulting. This is discrimination of the kind which Mark believes Jesus wants done away with. In the story Jesus is reluctant, but then lets himself be persuaded and heals the woman's daughter remotely.

Is it a legend? How does such remote healing work? One suspects that the story may not have footing in reality, at least not the idea of exorcism by remote control, though for some that will not be a problem.

Mark is telling the story to make a point: Gentiles are also loved by God. This woman from the coastal regions of Phoenicia in southern Syria serves as an example of this. The story must have been used to make this point well before Mark. Cross boundaries.



It might also have been told because of its focus on a woman. She comes out of the story looking strong and sensible. Perhaps she served as an inspiration for women to be strong. They could even persuade Jesus! Perhaps in some contexts women were the prime movers in insisting on compassion and resisting the hierarchies and distinctions which were held in place mainly by men.

When Matthew retells the story, he has the woman hail Jesus as Son of David and has the disciples tell Jesus to shoo her away (15:21-28). He then has Jesus say: "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house Israel", because Matthew understands that this was indeed the focus of the historical Jesus and that a mission to Gentiles came only after Easter, as 28:18-20 shows. As noted above Matthew also tells the story of the Gentile centurion which came to him and Luke through a separate source and was unknown to Mark. Matthew holds up both the centurion and the woman as examples of true faith, setting them in contrast to the response Jesus was receiving from his fellow Jews.

Prejudice can be ingrained, racism something people have grown up with. Our story, whether historical or not, acknowledges that the move to openness and generosity can be a struggle.

Can you see who is depicted as an Inca and not a Spaniard in this old Peruvian depiction of the Last Meal of Jesus?



For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Try putting yourself in the shoes of someone in your community who is experiencing discrimination – or walk in your own – what is it like and what would you hope for?
3. What kinds of discrimination do you see or experience in your world and what do you think can be done at a practical level?

Mark 8:27-38 – Getting it Right, Getting it Wrong

Caesarea Philippi is north of the Sea of Galilee, the furthest north of Jesus' journeys reported in the gospels. Named Caesarea, it symbolised the power of Rome's caesars or emperors in the region, represented through puppet governors like Philip, one of Herod the Great's sons. For people listening to the Gospel according to Mark in the Roman Empire, the setting would seem especially appropriate as a place to talk about who Jesus was. Down south in Jerusalem Rome's Pilate would crucify him on the charge of wanting to be "King of the Jews". Whose kingdom, whose empire is more powerful?

Quizzing his disciples about what people were saying about him, Jesus elicits typical responses: "Elijah or one of the prophets" (8:27-28). Mark recounted John's execution in chapter 6, so it is not surprising to see John's name as well. Had John's spirit or the spirit of one of the other prophets come back in Jesus? We know from Jewish writings which have survived that people did harbour the expectation that Elijah would return or Moses reappear. In chapter 9 Mark paints a kind of vision of how he believes the climax of history will be. Jesus is transfigured to appear in a spiritualised resurrection body and beside him are these two prophets: Moses and Elijah. So Mark shares the view that these prophets would reappear, but Jesus is someone different.

It is at this point that Jesus asks his own disciples and Peter declares that Jesus is the "Messiah". "Messiah" is the Hebrew word. In Greek it is "Christ" and it means "Anointed". People anointed leaders, and especially kings. The hope was around that a king like King David of David's line, so a "Son of David", would appear, sometimes on his own, sometimes, as in the transfiguration story, along with Moses and Elijah. Peter hailed Jesus as the Christ in these terms and that belief became a core confession, giving its name to the movement and its members as Christianity and Christians.

In Mark's gospel this is the first time the disciples proclaim their belief in Jesus as the "Christ". The much bigger issues was: so what is expected of Jesus if he is the Christ? The expectation of a Christ was not a new idea. There had already been others who expressed the hope that a "Christ" would come and there were others to follow. Jesus was not the only one who would be acclaimed as the "Christ".

One was Simon ben Kosebah, a century later, who led a revolt against Rome, whose name was turned into Bar Kochba, Son of the Star, reflecting the image of the Messiah as a rising star, such as we see used of Jesus as Messiah in the Christmas story. Mostly, people meant by Messiah someone who would liberate the land from the Romans.

That was the understanding which lay behind Pilate executing Jesus as "King of the Jews". Jesus didn't have armed followers like some Messiah figures, but he was clearly seen as subversive of Rome's authority and so had to go. How could you go about talking up the kingdom/empire of God and not be seen subversive?

It makes good sense, then, that Mark has Jesus try to persuade the disciples to keep quiet about this. It was potentially so dangerous. Mark's Jesus goes further, however, speaking of himself as the Son

of Man, another term of leadership. He informs the disciples that he was on his way to Jerusalem and would face arrest and execution before being raised from the dead. It is difficult to know how much this is written in the light of what happened later and placed on Jesus' lips or whether Jesus actually foretold his death in this way. It is entirely credible that he would have known that going to Jerusalem was extremely dangerous.

It is striking that Peter in effect corrects Jesus. He was well within his rights, given the usual understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah and what he, Peter, meant. We then have a striking challenge back from Jesus who corrects Peter. Mark then has Jesus outline a very different understanding of what being a Messiah meant and what it meant to follow him. It meant being prepared to face hardship and even death, as he was doing. Peter got the words right, but got the meaning wrong.



You could read this as a call to protest against Rome and be prepared to be arrested, even crucified, as many were, but when you look elsewhere in Mark, and especially in the chapters that follow, you see that there is much more to it. Jesus' way of being a Messiah is to advocate for compassion and justice for all, to talk about and act out God's radical reign of love and to take it right to the heart of power and influence in the community.

To love and value one's life was to do that, to share in God's love for others. That is gain. Jesus was appealing to people to act in what is also in their own interests, not at the expense of others in greed for wealth and power and self-importance. That self is to be denied. True self love is to see that our best interests are served when love for God, love for others, and love for ourselves converge.

The passage ends by coming back to the idea of history's climax when people believed there would be a judgement day. The first believers saw Jesus as the divinely endowed representative of humankind, the Son of Man, confronting people with whether they had stuck with him or abandoned him. It is typical of the threats used to try to persuade people. The most persuasive of all is not, however, such fear, but the appeal to embrace the way of love and compassion and to do so even when it costs.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Is loving oneself and loving others an impossibility?
3. What do you respect and value in leaders, political and otherwise, and what do you not?

Mark 9:30-37 – Who is the Greatest?

Our passage begins with the second of three times that Jesus predicts his fate in Jerusalem. Doing things in threes is a favourite technique which Mark uses in writing his gospel. He will divide his account of Jesus on the cross into 3 x 3 hour blocks. He will have three references to Jesus and the destruction of the temple. The third prediction of his fate, which follows the one in our passage, comes in chapter 10. Associated with each prediction is some teaching about how Jesus sees himself and what it means to be follow him.

In chapter 8 Peter assumed that Jesus wanted to be great and so rejected the idea that he would suffer and die. Here we find the disciples still preoccupied with greatness (9:33-34). In chapter 10 James and John want to be great. Mark has put these stories together to make a strong point. Greatness is not measured by how much power one has. It measured by how open one is to being a loving person. By bringing a child before them Jesus is confronting the complicated mechanisms people use to make themselves great with the innocent simplicity of the small child.

This is not about idealising infancy, as though we should all return to being naïve children. It is about a very different understanding of what is in the best interests of others, ourselves, and God. We do not need to justify ourselves by impressing others or even impressing ourselves, let alone God. We do not have to conjure up a persona or mask to hide behind in order to elicit love. We need to drop the facades and open ourselves to being loved simply as we are in all our frailty and so to stop being preoccupied with ourselves. That way not only will we love ourselves better (love your neighbour as you love yourself) but we will also have more time and energy available to love others.



This amounts to a serious challenge to popular notions of greatness then and now. The notion of a suffering, crucified Messiah was, as Peter recognised, a contradiction of what being a Messiah was meant to be. In chapter 10 Mark has Jesus declare that he did not come to be served but to serve (10:45). Vulnerable love is the mark of greatness for Jesus and for his disciples. This is a deliberate subversion of traditional values. Mark carries this theme through to the cross, where, though falsely accused of being the King of the Jews, Jesus truly is the Messiah but of a very different kind. His crown is a crown of thorns. His throne is a cross. The strength of lowliness is a very different kind of strength.

Such a notion is fragile and easily undone. It is easy to view the story of Jesus' resurrection as doing just that. So Jesus does become enthroned at God's right hand. He does get to where Peter wanted him to get. Peter was right. It's just that the way to get there was hard. So now power has recovered its position and love and lowliness are reduced to something no longer central, but simply a test along the way to glory. They belong to the past. Does Mark think that Easter undid everything he was saying about Jesus and his way?

The answer is surely, no. In the story of Jesus' resurrection the first believers were not hailing a reversal: lowliness is over. It was not God saying "no" to what Jesus was, but God saying "yes: this is the way I am. This is true greatness." The trouble is that often when we think of God, we project onto God models of greatness like those which Peter and the disciples treasured. Then God's greatness is not God's love but God's power and we are in danger of making God like a little child in a very different sense of wanting to be the centre of attention, thoroughly self-obsessed. Instead, we can see God as being like Jesus, indeed seeing God in Jesus and seeing Jesus as the revelation of who God is and what God is like. This is where Mark tries to lead us. Jesus was not an exception in the life of God but the embodiment of who God is.

Our passage ends with a promise about welcoming. When it says "one such child" it is probably referring not literally to little children – welcome as they are – but to disciples who in Mark's sense become like little children and have abandoned the machinations of self-aggrandisement. When we open ourselves to one another, we are opening ourselves to Jesus, and ultimately to God and God's being in our lives. There is nothing greater nor more generous and life-giving.

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 do you think drives people to want to be "greater" than others?
3. What can we do to inculcate Jesus' values in our families, among our children, in our churches and what are the counter forces which undermine these values?