

Mark's Gospel Session 3

1:14 – 8:26

1:14-15 – Proclamation of the Kingdom: Note that the word “handed over” (*dothenai*) is an important word in Greek because it also refers to Jesus being handed over when arrested and refers back to the servant songs in Isaiah. There is a parallel between Jesus and John the Baptist that Mark highlights. The beheading of John is a looking forward to the Passion and Death of Jesus. Both are seen as Elijah figures and Jesus is mistaken for John by Herod.

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Miracles in Mark

- **Cure of Simon's Mother-in-Law (1:29-31)**
- **Cure of a Man suffering from leprosy (1:40-45)**
- **Cure of a paralytic (2:1-12)**
- **Cure of a Man with a withered hand (3:1-6)**
- **Calming of the Storm (4:35-41)**
- **Cure of the Gerasene Demoniac (5:1-21)**
- **Cure of Woman with haemorrhage and the Raising of Jairus's Daughter (5:22-43)**
- **First Miracle of the loaves (6:30-44)**
- **Healing of the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30)**
- **Healing of the deaf man (7:31-7)**
- **Second Miracle of loaves (8:1-10)**

Cure of a Paralytic

This is not only a cure it is a controversy story in which the growing opposition to Jesus is highlighted over the claim to having the power to forgive sins, which in Judaism belongs to God alone.

Note the connection between sin and sickness in Judaism. Such afflictions as lameness are seen as a sign of ritual impurity and of a ruptured relationship with God. In Judaism sin has both an individual and communal dimension. The Day of Atonement is a ritual in which Israel collectively asks forgiveness and harks back to Exodus and the punishment of the people collectively for their lack of faith symbolised by the golden calf.

Mark writes from a post resurrection perspective in which the rejection, death and resurrection of Jesus was willed by God. If God willed Jesus' death as vindication, then he must have willed the opposition to Jesus that led to his death. Strong opposition existed between different religious groups with Judaism at the time of Jesus and immediately after his death. This opposition came to be a focus of rivalry between some groups of Judaism and emerging Christian communities, which at some time may well have resulted in their expulsion from the Temple and Synagogue.

Faith is normally seen as a precondition of healing. In this case the faith is displayed by the litter bearers.

It is a controversy story because it shows the opposition the Jesus faced from the Scribes and Pharisees who saw his claim to forgive sins as a claim to a divine prerogative. On this basis Jesus was deemed to be guilty of blasphemy.

Note that at the start Jesus was stated to be “preaching the Word” before he was interrupted by the people with the lame man. At the end the people are said by Mark to be “astonished” and “praised God”. The whole episode has led people to God which is the goal of evangelization.

Calming of the Storm a retelling of Psalm 107: 23-32?

This is one of the nature miracles but could also be addressing issues important to the Markan community. In the contemporary world view evil spirits were seen as inhabiting deep water and were particularly active during storms. Therefore this incident can be seen as part of Mark’s narrative of Jesus being at war against Satan and evil spirits during his ministry.

That Jesus is asleep is significant: sleeping at dangerous times is a sign of a clear conscience in contrast to the fear and anxiety of the disciples. This is another incident that shows the disciples as lacking faith and confidence in the face of adversity. It may well be addressing the issue concerning the perception that God is absent when he is most needed. The storm is an image of the evil forces in the world that Jesus has to confront. Only God can protect us in adversity if we have faith (Psalm 69:14-15). Mark’s readers would have understood Jesus as God’s agent who triumphs over these mighty forces thereby answering the question that is posed at the end of so many miracles in Mark **“Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him?”** They are still on the journey towards true faith.

The Gerasene Demoniac

This is Jesus’ first miracle after setting foot on pagan territory after crossing the Sea of Galilee. This should be read in conjunction with the healing of the Capernaum Demoniac (1:21-8) where the miracles gave authority to his teaching which was seen as being new.

The narrative builds up the afflictions of the possessed person to show the significance of Jesus’ victory over evil. Evil has destroyed a man’s life both spiritually and physically. This incident also gives shape to the process of evangelisation and repentance. An encounter with Jesus produces a life enhancing transformation. The proper response to such a transformation is discipleship – follow Jesus as the cured demoniac seeks to do. However unlike many other such incidents Jesus does tell him to keep quiet but rather “Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.” Note that more people were amazed at what Jesus had done through the accounts of the cured demoniac than was the case with those who witnessed the incident.

Cure of woman with a haemorrhage and healing of Jairus’ daughter

The narrative structure is that of a Markan sandwich. The cure of the woman is introduced as a narrative device to allow for the passage of time from the daughter

being ill to the time of Jesus receiving news that she had died. Note again the importance of faith and the ridicule that Jesus also encounters.

Note also how Jesus both implicitly and explicitly challenges some of the practices connected with ritual purity, he touches lepers, he speaks to a ritually impure woman, who touches him. The power that goes out of Jesus is the power of God. To touch the sacred while ritually impure is sacrilege.

Noe in both stories the use of the number twelve. Twelve is approaching childbearing age. Death and continuous bleeding would have been regarded as life destroying experiences. The young girl would have lost the possibility of bearing children. Jesus therefore in a wider sense is bringing life to people where faith is demonstrated.

First Miracle of the Loaves

The lonely place that is the location would have reminded the readers of the wanderings in the desert of the Israelites after their liberation from Egypt. It would have reminded Mark's readers of the Manna ;provided to the Israelites during their wanderings.

The pity Jesus feels for them is for their lack of direction due to inadequate teaching. Hence the implication of their being "sheep without a shepherd". The disciples almost reinforce this with their request for Jesus to send the crowds away since there was no food. They are unequal to the challenge to provide it themselves. The implication is that as yet, they are not yet ready to be the shepherds that the crowd lack.

There is a juxtaposition With Herod's banquet (6:14-29). Herod's banquet is for the elite; the feeding miracles is for all. Herod's banquet is about a grudge against John that contrasts with the compassion of Jesus for the crowd.

Note the eucharistic language of the account that looks forward to Jesus' last meal . . . raised his eyes to heaven . . . said the blessing . . . broke the loaves . . . handed them to his disciples.

This is a prayer of thanksgiving not a blessing of the bread.

The Greek for "they ate as much as they wanted" reflects the extravagance of the amount of food available. (Ex16:13-21)

The abundance of food left over is reminiscent of the abundance in the time of the Messiah

Jesus walks on Water

The focus is on the lack of understanding of the disciples: "They were utterly and completely dumbfounded, because they had not seen what the miracles of the loaves meant; their minds were closed".

This reminds us of the lack of understanding of Jesus family in Mark 3:20- 21) and 3:31-35)

It also looks forward to the clash with the Scribes and Pharisees over dietary rules in chapter 7.

“Courage it is I” is characteristic of God’s self-identification as in the burning bush in Exodus 3:1-15.

“Do not be afraid” is a characteristic divine revelatory phrase as in Luke 1:13

Second Feeding Narrative

This takes place in Gentile territory after the miracles of the healing of the Syro-Phoenician Woman and the healing of the Deaf Man at the end of chapter 7. in contrast to the first one and shows there is an abundance for both Jews and Gentiles of food both spiritual and material.

Parables of the Kingdom:

- Parable of the Sower 4:1 – 20
- Lamp under a bushel 4:21 – 25
- Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29
- Parable of the mustard seed 4:30-32

A **parable** is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse, that illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles. It is seen by some scholars like J. Meier as linked to the tradition of Hebrew riddles (Marshallim) In the view of J. Jeremias the parables in the gospels have undergone modifications from those uttered by the Historical Jesus to address issues in the Early Church of the time of Mark. On this view the allegorical interpretation given to the sower is a later addition and was not part of the parable likely to have been narrated by Jesus himself. While there is a body of scholars to support this view it is best to look at their significance within the frame constructed by Mark.

Note the structure of this section:

A Introduction (vv 1-2) is parallel in length and conclusion to vv 33-34

B parable of the sower (4:3-9) corresponds to the seed parables (4:26-32)

C Reasons for speaking in parables (4:10-12) parallels the sayings of (4:21-25)

D The centre of the chapter is the allegory of the seeds (4:13-20) with the stress on the difficulties of accepting and responding to the Word. The Word of Jesus is a summons to conversion, but that word can meet resistance and failure.

(Donahue/Harrington)

Parable of the Sower: Note that, according to Jeremias, the method of cultivation used was to scatter the seed and then to plough up the earth. Therefore pathways

were used and ploughed up in due course. Note also that rocky ground is never far below the surface soil in Palestine.

Mark as author/editor has adapted the parable probably to suit a different audience compared with the time of Jesus. Hence the addition of the allegory 4:13-20. The focus is on the waste of the word and the failure in its being spread but nevertheless in due course there will be a super abundance of success – but in God's time. Possibly the implied audience are those disciples who are asking the question " If Jesus really was the Son of God why was he not followed by the multitudes and why was he strung up on a cross powerless?" The Markan paradox is that strength manifests itself in weakness and that he is modelling a Suffering Messiah in the manner of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. **Only the apostles and the inner circle are given the inside story while the others are left to ponder the parables for themselves.** But privileged access does not guarantee a full understanding.

Mark's gospel has teaching for everybody but some special teaching for the inner group – the Apostles. The lines 4:8 - 10 are ones that have most puzzled scholars and readers.

There is reference to the call of Isaiah:

Whom shall I send who will go for us?
And I said "Here am I, send me. He said
Go and say to the people
Listen and listen, but never understand!
Look and look, but never perceive.
Make this people's heart coarse,
Make their ears dull, shut their eyes tight."

Jeremiah is called to "pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow (Jer 1:9) and is ordered to proclaim, "Hear this o senseless and foolish people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear" (Jer 5:21)

The verses 4:10-12 are obscure and have proved problematic. In the scriptures that Jesus inherited there is a strong focus on the sovereignty of God and there is a strong predestinarian thrust in Jewish thought at this time. Note the hardening theology of Exodus. Jesus is revealing to his closest followers the secrets of the Kingdom, that outsiders will not understand. There is a strong deterministic streak in the thinking of Judaism – that everything is in the hands of God Exodus 4:21 "God said to Moses 'Think of the wonders I have given you power to perform, once you are back in Egypt! You are to perform them before Pharaoh, but I myself shall make him obstinate, and he will not let the people go."

What is the Markan mystery of the Kingdom given to insiders? The notion of "insiders" and "outsiders" does not refer to the chosen disciples who understand what the

Kingdom is about on the one hand and the crowds on the other who find it beyond their understanding but rather it denotes a relationship with Jesus and a perception of who he truly is.

The mystery of the Kingdom of God that causes blindness and deafness in Mark's gospel is the paradox that God's will is manifested in the cross of Jesus. Peter himself initially finds this incomprehensible as at the First prediction of the Passion. Those who understand are those who listen to the Word of God and respond to it.

In this respect the allegorical interpretation of the Sower is a key to an understanding of Mark's gospel. They are images of the responses to God's word.

Seed on the edge of the path Satan's snatching away the seed reminds us of Peter's objection to Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death and Jesus' response: "Get behind me Satan".

Seeds on patches of rock: the word has no root, and the people fall away (scandalised" is the literal translation. This in Mark is the fate of those close to Jesus who fall away when things get tough. Jesus' family is initially amazed at Jesus' teaching and wisdom (6:2) only to be scandalised. Note also in chapter 3 the family are concerned about Jesus and Jesus rejects any priority by blood in his relationships. His relatives are only those who listen to the word of God and respond to it. The disciples close to Jesus are scandalised and flee when he is arrested, (15:50)

Seed choked by brambles The rich young Man in 10:22 is prevented from following Jesus by riches

The seed in rich soil These are model disciples The summons to discipleship is in the form of a call (1:16-20, 2:13-14).

The parable of the growing seed emphasises the fact that God is in charge and that success is a gift from God and not something that human beings have achieved themselves. Understanding is a gift as well.