

The Gospel of Mark

Mark's gospel and the call of Discipleship



Introduction

What is a disciple? Literally a learner

- Greek word for disciple is *mathetes* – literally 'learner'
- disciple itself comes from Latin *discipulus* learner, scholar, pupil etc..

which in itself raises the question of how they learn

It is a very obvious but nevertheless important point is that

- the disciples are not called disciples just because they were taught by Jesus (many others were taught and not called disciples)

they were called disciples because

- they lived with Jesus, followed him around, misunderstood him, asked questions etc...

also worth noting that they only seemed to fully grasp what Jesus was about when he wasn't with them anymore.

Mark in Current Scholarship

Despite Marxsen's work on redaction in Mark for many years was the poor neighbour to Matthew and Luke

- Growth of modern narrative criticism recognises significance of
 - Significance of Mark's storytelling style.
 - Whole gospel readings
 - The function of discipleship within the narrative

Significance of Storytelling style

Mark is the gospel that pays attention to detail and evokes a sense of being there

- often the longer account
- uses vivid detail to paint an image
- impression of eyewitness account

Mark 6.35-44 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." **They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?"**³⁸ **And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see."** **When they had found out,** they said, "Five, and two fish."³⁹ Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the **green** grass.⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of **hundreds and of fifties**.⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; **and he divided the two fish among them all**.⁴² And all ate and were filled;⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.⁴⁴ Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men

but also important is Jesus engagement with three groups of people

- 'the authorities' – opposed from the start
- 'the crowd' – amazed but often ambivalent
- 'the disciples' – those who are closest and yet so far away

Mark 2.6-7, 12-14 Now some of the **scribes** were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"... And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before **all of them**; so that **they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"** ¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea; the **whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them**. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "**Follow me.**" **And he got up and followed him.**

Also interesting are the single characters who engage with Jesus in their own way.

The Structure of Mark

The major structure of Mark's Gospel seems to split into four major sections

- Jesus' ministry
 - setting up the features of Jesus' ministry – messianic revelation; disciples, healing, controversy parables

Mark 4:33-34 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Notice the end of the previous section – which then becomes the theme for section 2

- Discipleship

boats scenes of failed discipleship interleaved with response of individuals.

- The Way of the Cross

learning the marks of the kingdom – belief, being least, giving up everything, following Jesus to the cross

- Jesus' journey to the cross and beyond

The structure works by layering,

- Jesus' ministry lays the foundation for discipleship
- Discipleship for the way of the Cross
- The way of the Cross for Jesus' own journey to the Cross
- The themes of true conflict and response, discipleship and recognition

Mark and Failed Discipleship

Here begin to have first significant encounter with Mark's disciples, obviously very far from ideal and begin to realise that Mark's message of discipleship is subtle

Notice the end of the previous section

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Characteristics of failed discipleship

Three boat scenes

- Mark 4:35-41

The Stilling of the Storm – in Mark the first of the great nature miracles

- Jesus reprehends them for being deiloi – timid/cowardly
- Who is this??

- Mark 6:45-52

Walking on the water – straining against the oars against the wind (echoes of stilling)

- Jesus walked towards them, they were afraid and he told them not to be afraid
- They didn't sunihmi comprehend, perceive, have insight into the feeding of the five thousand

- Mark 8:14-21

Following the four thousand – conversation in the boat after engagement with Pharisees

- They had only one loaf of bread (saw feeding as a reprimand?)
- String of reprimands for disciples – reminiscent of the people of God in Old Testament
 - Think and understand
 - Hearts hardened
 - Not seeing eyes
 - Not hearing ears
 - Not remembering
- Picks up the parabolic element in Mark 4

But sandwiched between these three are cameo's of better discipleship

- Gerasene demoniac – swineherds flee, villager beg to leave, demoniac begged to follow
- Jairus – overcame status to beg Jesus to heal and didn't lose faith
- Woman with a haemorrhage – reached out and touched Jesus
- Syrophonecian woman – courage and insight
- Man who was deaf and had speech impediment – despite being told not to say anything proclaimed loudly
- Blind man who saw men as trees walking

All of this becomes balanced with the Caesarea Philippi account and Peter's response to Jesus

The Entry Into Jerusalem

Exploring the cry of the Crowd on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

- Its taken from Psalm 118.25-26 with some significant changes
 - removal of second cry for aid

- change of blessing from the temple to blessing for Kingdom of David.

Original context of the Psalm was to celebrate victory of a Davidic King

- first half of the Psalm celebrates his success (1-18)
- then begs for entry into the temple (19-20)
- the congregation then join with him in offering thanksgiving (21-24)
- the priests then address him praying that God will continue to save the people and blessing the King from within the temple (25ff)

Then became used, as one of the Hallel psalms (Ps 113-118) first with the passover and with other feasts

- became an anticipation of future salvation by a Davidic king (cf Mekilta on Exod 12.42)
- played a vital role of Jewish eschatological expectation – particularly new Exodus

In the light of this note the significance of the Parable of the Tenants

- Vineyard - as God's chosen people
- eschatological fulfilment of the hopes

Coupling of Fig Tree with Cleansing of temple

This illustrates one of Mark's favourite narrative techniques – the juxtaposition of two episodes which lend meaning to each other

It is now common to interpret the passage in the light of the cleansing of the temple and of Hosea 9.15-16

- Thus the cursing of the fig-tree is to be understood as much as a symbolic action as the cleansing of the temple was
- Fig tree symbolised peace and prosperity in the land – particularly God's favour on the nation

but a fig tree in leaf with no fruit promises what it cannot fulfil and so is rejected by Jesus.

The story in Mark is wrapped around the cleansing in such a way as to demand we read them together.

In a similar way Jesus' action in the temple seems unjust – at Passover, large numbers of people needing money changed and pure animals for sacrifice

- discussion about at what point they moved into the temple precincts themselves – so is possibly a live issue but that is not the point. Tries to split sacred and secular too clearly.

- Perhaps the issue was that the temple was, like the fig tree, suggesting it could offer something that it could not – Jesus didn't cause it to wither but did direct attention elsewhere
- nb A house of Prayer followed by Jesus' longest explicit teaching about prayer in Mark's gospel.

Response of the authorities vs Woman with Jar.

Again in this section of Mark, questions of response become a crucial factor

- the authorities from the cleansing to parable of tenants are deeply opposed to Jesus
- the crowd promise good in the triumphal entry but then change throughout the week
- disciples become increasingly unreliable until they flee in Gethsemane and deny Jesus.

Woman with the alabaster jar, alone remains faithful.

- Alabaster jar (simply what they kept perfume in) full of oil of nard perfume – oil from the Spikenard plant that only grows in the Himalayas (China, Tibet and Nepal)
- Psalm 133 – suggests that its usage could be lavish but this seems extreme even for that tradition – thus woman is responding with generosity which is a marker of the Kingdom.
- This action will form a part of the good news proclaimed around the world.

Beginnings and Endings

Probably the best illustration of failed discipleship

Beginning of Mark's gospel – clearly laid out

Mk 1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

but the ending is not...

problems with the ending has produced various alternative endings for Mark's gospel.

but what if the ending that exists is really the ending that was intended?

Some features that explore this

- The clunky grammar may be a problem but doesn't have to be
- More importantly if it ends like this it raises the question of discipleship once more.

- 16:7 contains the command to ‘Go tell’ – the time has now come for proclamation
- ‘fled’ – indicates discipleship response
 - Mark 5:14 The swineherds ran off
 - Mark 14:50 All of them deserted him and fled.
 - Mark 14:52 but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.
 - Mark 16:8 So they went out and fled from the tomb,

If this is the case then the ending of Mark becomes failed discipleship par excellence

The terrible irony is that now is the time to speak. The tomb is empty; the crucified King is alive, vindicated by God, as he said he would be. What is hidden is now come to light (4:21-22); the disciples can tell secret things they were commanded to withhold now that Jesus has risen from the dead (9.9). The faithful women have the opportunity to do what the men could not. And they fail. They flee, just as the men – because they are afraid.

D.H. Juel ‘A Disquieting Silence: The Matter of the Ending’ in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God*, p. 9

The fleeing of the disciples

Which leaves the gospel hanging on a knife edge of discipleship.....

reminds us that ultimately this is God's work...whether we join in with it or not.

Messianic Secret vs Messianic Revelation

Wrede and the Messianic secret (question of historical vs literary approaches)

- Again begin to see a balance between secrecy and revelation
- Circumstances of the secrecy vs circumstances of the revelation

Apocalyptic and the importance of definition

from apocalupsis = revelation

removal of the veil that separates heaven and earth

moments of recognition and the stirrings of faith

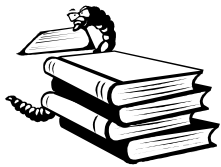
The three major moments of Mark's story

- Baptism

Mark 1:10-11 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

- Transfiguration
Mark 9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"
- Crucifixion
Mark 15:38-39 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.39 Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Again notice the drawing in of the observer into being the one who speaks the revelatory words.



Best Markan Commentaries

John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington *The Gospel of Mark* (Liturgical Press, 2005)

R.T. France *Mark* (NIGTC, Eerdmans) 2002

R A Guelich *Mark 1.1-8.26* (Word Biblical Commentary) 1989

C A Evans *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Word Biblical Commentary) 2001

M. D. Hooker *Mark* (Black's New Testament commentaries) 1991

C. Myers *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis) 1988

B. Witherington *Mark* (Eerdmans) 2001