

## Reading Mark: The heart of the gospel (Mark 9.2-9)

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A few weeks ago, I offered an introduction to the gospel according to Mark, noting some of the more striking features of the text that most scholars believe was the first written of the four NT gospels; a text that we will be focussing on in detail in coming months. This week, as we celebrate the Transfiguration, which ushers us into the season of Lent, we're focussing in on the heart of this gospel – the passion of Jesus.

If you're like me, you find the early months of the Christian liturgical calendar quite abrupt. We've just celebrated the birth of Christ and now we're preparing for his death, thrust onto the journey to the cross. It seems so sudden – what about the life in between? But that's what it's like in Mark's portrayal. Barely have we started reading and we're into Lent. By chapter three there are groups conspiring to 'destroy him' (v6), and from there on the shadows continue to lengthen. A full third of this gospel is taken up with the last week of Jesus' life – the story of his betrayal, travail and death. Each of the gospels recount this week, but in Mark, proportionally, it dominates.

And once it begins, the whole pace and feel changes. 'A narrative which up to this point has felt quite rushed and packed, even a bit scattergun in its effect, noticeably slows' (Williams 2014.53). There are more quotations from the OT and more detail about where things take place. Earlier events tend to be clustered together and located somewhat haphazardly in relation to geography. In the passion narrative, however, Mark offers a series of separate episodes, each occurring at a particular site in or around Jerusalem – the upstairs room, Garden of Gethsemane, high priest's house, Governor's residence, Golgotha and so on. And this structural change has given rise to the suggestion, which I find compelling, that the core of this section is drawn from

a liturgy developed by early Christians as part of a reflective walk to the places that Jesus went or was taken in the last week of his life – an early form of what we'd call the 'Stations of the Cross'. Here's how Rowan Williams imagines it (2014.54):

*At each geographical point in the city, each 'station', at specific times of day, there would be a narrative with some Old Testament quotations to show that these events had been foreseen in the divine plan, and then perhaps some prayers, concluding at the tomb with the announcement that 'He is not here, he is risen'.*

If you've been to the old city of Jerusalem, you'll know this could work, and it certainly helps to account for Mark's structure and style.

Another feature of this gospel's narrative of the passion is the way in which Jesus is left progressively isolated. Early on, he's almost always in company – with his disciples, with villagers and townsfolk. Even when he was in the wilderness forty days, Mark says he was *'with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him'* (1.13). But towards the end, he's increasingly deserted. When he prays in Gethsemane there's no reply from heaven; and the disciples struggle to be with him; they sleep as he prays, and soon after, they flee. Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, the Council condemns him, the scribes accuse him, the Roman governor trades him, soldiers abuse him, and those who pass by, mock. And, in the end, hanging desolate on the cross, his last recorded words in this gospel are chilling: *Eloi, eloi, lema sabbachthani – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Christ's abandonment is strongly emphasised in these last pages and the intensity of this progression is significant when it comes to understanding the direction and logic of this Gospel. 'Our attention is focussed mercilessly on this one figure'.

*As he is progressively set apart from group after group, authority after authority, friend after friend, it becomes clearer and clearer that he alone has to carry the whole meaning, the whole theological and spiritual weight of what is going on. (Williams 2014.60)*

It's *his* passion. He alone must undergo it. And in the original Greek of this gospel, the necessity of his undergoing it is reinforced even in the grammar of the text. Up until these last chapters, the verbs used of Jesus are almost all in the *active* voice with him as the subject – authoritatively speaking and acting on the world. But from the moment he's 'handed over' he's rarely again the subject of the action. The verbs connected with him are almost all in the *passive* voice. From here on he is the *recipient*, the *object* – suffering the actions of others (see Vanstone 2006.17-33).

The perspective we get, then, is of Jesus as *victim*. In John's portrayal, Jesus is more verbal and poised – strangely 'in control'. In Mark, he's silent, submissive, undefended – like a lamb being led to the slaughter. There's one moment of exception to this, and it comes in the middle of his trial, in response to a question from the high priest. He asks: '*Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?*' And Jesus, who until now has remained silent, replies clearly: '*I am*'.

His breaking of his silence with this claim, the unveiling of the 'secret' of his identity at this point is striking and all important. 'It is when Jesus is stripped of all hope, of all power, when he stands alone in the middle of this meaningless nightmare, with no hope of life, it is then and only then that he declares who he is', Williams writes (2014.58). With these words, 'I am', he evokes the Divine Name disclosed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus (3.13). In contrast to John, who narrates him evoking this name on numerous occasions ('*I am the good shepherd*'; '*I am the bread of life*'; '*I am the light of*

*the world... the way... the door... the resurrection'* and so on); Mark narrows it down to this one solitary declaration, at a point when it's clear what's happening and where this is all leading.

*'Are you the Messiah...?'* *'I am'*, says Jesus, *'and you will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven'*. This could sound like reprisal – *'I'm suffering now, I'm going to die, but I'll get you in the end'*. But here, context is everything. The whole point, the whole trajectory of this story suggests that it's not about exercising power from on high; that it's all to do with his willingness to enter in and undergo this suffering. *This* reveals the true nature of God. Mark is moving us beyond the idea that we listen to Jesus simply because he does and says wonderful things, or will magically make difficulty disappear. The really astounding thing is that he stands with us, undefended, in the place of difficulty; that he allows the full force of the world's injustice and violence to be expended on him. If this helpless, isolated Jesus declares, *'I'*, as a vulnerable, mortal human being, am where God is, am who God is, this means that God's presence and power cannot be overcome by anything that befalls us in this world – neither loneliness nor injustice, nor death, nor the terrible, apparently meaningless, suffering in which human beings so often live. (see Williams 2014.61) *'Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?'* *I am*, says Jesus at the point, when he looks most unlike our standard version of God.

The *mystery* is how this helps anything, how it changes anything. Indeed, if you go to Mark's story of the resurrection, it seems like it hasn't. The women run from the empty tomb, terrified, without words – *'saying nothing to anyone, because they were afraid'*. This gospel ends as abruptly as it begins, and with as little explanation\*.

So where are we left – those of us reading Mark all these centuries later? Seeking a word of truth from this paradoxical text, which proclaims ‘good news’ with exhortations to secrecy, and where the Messiah is present in powerlessness; overcoming by undergoing.

‘Looking at the overall patterns of Mark’s text’, Williams says, *we can see that it is a book about how Jesus ...takes you constantly in and out of silence, in and out of language. Here for a moment, you see, you grasp; and you then have to let go and begin again. You think that you might have mastered it; and suddenly find you haven’t, and you must be quiet and listen. This Gospel is a book about faith, and more specifically about that fundamental aspect of faith which is the trustful letting go into a love that is completely surprising and works completely by its own rules, not yours. That is perhaps why it’s appropriate to think of Mark – whether he was the first of the Evangelists or not – as in a strong sense the ‘beginning’ of the gospel and the ‘first principle’ of the gospel ...: the place where the distinctive colour of the Christian faith is defined’.*

In his (Mark’s) company this year, may we too find faith – courage to live, and live again.

*\*The oldest manuscripts of Mark’s gospel end at 16.8. Most later manuscripts contain some additional verses, which were added by others at later points in time – perhaps because the original is so abrupt and apparently unresolved.*

#### References

Rowan Williams (2014) *Meeting God in Mark*, SPCK, London, UK.

W H Vanstone (2006) *The Stature of Waiting*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA.