

10 February 2018

The Gospel According to Mark (Mark 1: 40-45)

© Sarah Bachelard

Many of you will know of the concept of the 'lectionary'. From the Latin, 'lectio', to read, a lectionary is an authorized system for reading the Scriptures. Lectionaries came about in the Christian tradition because the 'sheer size of the Bible means that a selection of readings must be made for Sunday [or Saturday night] use', and this necessitates some method for making the selection. One possible method is for preachers and congregations to seek to discern what's needful for them or what's asking to be read week by week, and this kind of approach has obvious strengths in allowing for responsiveness to context.

A danger with this approach, however, is that we tend to gravitate towards the texts we already know or like or feel comfortable with and so risk leaving out other bits, perhaps even missing out on gifts that might emerge from wrestling with what appear to be the less congenial passages. So to counteract the dangers of what we might call 'subjectivism' in the choice of Scripture for worship, various lectionary systems have been developed over the centuries. In recent decades 'widespread ecumenical agreement has been reached' to bring forth what's called the *Revised Common Lectionary*. In Australia, this lectionary is used by most mainstream churches – Anglican, many Baptist, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Uniting Church, and other congregations. For Sunday worship, it operates on a three-year cycle based on the Gospels – Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark and C Luke, while bits of the Gospel of John are read every year, in Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Christmas.¹

Here at Benedictus, we don't always strictly follow the lectionary for a given week – we risk a degree of 'subjectivism – mostly mine! Very often, though, we do

¹ *An Australian Lectionary 2018: Year B* (Sydney: Broughton Books, 2018), p.3.

use them, and even when we don't strictly follow, we keep in touch with this system – reading, over the course of the year, from the same books as the lectionary suggests. This year, as you've no doubt picked up already, we're in the year of Mark, Year B – and since we'll be hearing quite a bit from this gospel in coming weeks and months, I wanted tonight to offer some brief background to this text, commonly (though not universally) thought by scholars to be the first of the gospels written.

The book starts like this: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). And then we're off. Mark plunges straight into the story of John baptizing in the wilderness and by verse 9, the adult Jesus has made his first appearance. There's no birth narrative, no Christmas story, no cosmic 'In the beginning was the Word' type prologue. Even so, this first, deceptively simple sentence is freighted with theological and political significance.

'We know from the letters of Paul that – by the time Mark's gospel was probably written in the 60s – the word for "good news" [or gospel], *evangelion* in Greek, was already commonly used by Christians as a ... shorthand for the Christian story'.² So, as Rowan Williams has commented, a book called 'The Good News about Jesus' would not have been too surprising for a Christian of that era. But for anyone else, it would have come across pretty provocatively. That's because *evangelion* is a piece of political jargon – it's the term used in the ancient world for an official proclamation, an important public announcement – the birth of a royal baby, the capture of a foreign city, the engagement of the Emperor's son. 'An *evangelion*, a "gospel", a good message, is [writes Williams] a message about something that alters the climate in which people live, changing the politics and the possibilities; it transforms the landscape of social life'.³

So here you have a 'small and eccentric and [from Rome's point of view] rather worrying religious sect'⁴ making a rather large claim. The public, political character of this message is further amplified by the fact that this 'good news' is said

² Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.6.

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.6.

⁴ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.7.

to be of Jesus the anointed – that is, someone who is a royal personage, God’s Son no less. The very first verse of Mark’s gospel, in other words, is effectively an announcement of ‘regime change’ and this is reinforced by the first words Mark gives Jesus to speak: ‘The time is fulfilled’, he says, ‘and the kingdom of God has come near; repent [change your view of things] and ‘trust this proclamation’. As Williams writes, ‘the reader is warned from the very first verse of Mark’s Gospel that she or he must look and listen in the Gospel for all the things that change the state of affairs in the world’.⁵

By the end of the first chapter, we’re beginning to get a sense of the kind of change this is. Jesus has been teaching in the synagogue with new authority and freedom, he’s healed Peter’s mother-in-law and a whole bunch of others in the city of Capernaum, and has begun moving through Galilee, proclaiming this news of God’s nearness and casting out demons. And then comes the passage we read tonight – the healing of a leper. And since leprosy was not only a disfiguring condition but also barred the leper from participating in the social and worshipping life of Israel, this healing signifies not only cure but the restoration of belonging in community. That’s what Jesus’ instruction that the leper present himself to the priest is about – so that he can be formally certified cleansed and re-enter normal life. It seems that this ‘good news’, this ‘evangelion’ has to do with mercy and the overcoming of estrangement.

Yet what comes next is rather puzzling, and seems to contradict the whole point of the gospel. Jesus sternly warns the delighted ex-leper, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone’. This turns out to be a recurring kind of injunction. Earlier Jesus had not permitted the demons he cast out to speak, because Mark writes, ‘they knew him’ and there are several other healings after which Jesus immediately says, ‘don’t tell anyone about it’. This is a book supposedly about proclamation, ‘dedicated to announcing something; yet, again and again, the Jesus of St Mark underlines the

⁵ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, pp.7-8.

need for secrecy'.⁶ So much is this an emphasis of the gospel, that scholars speak of 'the Messianic Secret' in Mark and wonder what it's about.

Williams suggests that at least one important dimension in this, is that Jesus doesn't want to become known simply for being a miracle worker. He heals those who come to him, because he's stirred by compassion and he cares: 'Moved by pity, Jesus stretched out his hand', we hear in this story. But he's not *doing* the miracles to establish his credentials or convince anyone, and he doesn't want people flocking to see the show and remaining (as it were) on the outside of it, gawking like tourists.

What would be so wrong with that? It's got something to do with the whole point of the message – which is not simply to go public with new information but to bring about the possibility of people living newly oriented to God's imminence, their minds and hearts changed, having undergone a radical shift of allegiance and so of possibility. That's why, in so many of the stories of healing, Jesus wants to know if people believe in or trust him.

It's not that this is a kind of threshold test – do you like me enough for me to bother, have you achieved some feat of conviction? Rather, it's to do with relationship – are you connecting, do you want to connect to me and where I'm from? Have you glimpsed what this is all really about? Or do you just want a piece of magic so you can get back to your old life? It's clear that the leper in our story has glimpsed something of that deeper reality and trusts it: 'If you choose, you can make me clean'. But Jesus doesn't want him spreading that news outside of a relational context, as if contact with him is like a pill you can take and remain fixed in your old way of being.

There's a lot more to be said about the subtlety of Mark's theology – and we'll explore more of it in the next while. But as we prepare this coming week to enter the season of Lent, maybe this isn't such a bad place to end tonight's reflection. Lent offers us a ritual context for renewing our commitment to being in relationship with God in Christ. It invites us, in the lead up to Easter, really to focus on prayer, on

⁶ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.29.

connection, on deepening our trust and our consent to being encountered and transformed. And I think our putting ourselves in the way of this matters more than ever. Because the more we hope to contribute to the healing of the world's need, the more we hope to participate in justice and love, the more radically we need to be sourced in this relationship, responsive to this person. So in the next few days, as we prepare for Lent, I invite you to spend a little time reflecting about what you long for, what you need from God, what you might dare ask. My prayer this Lent is that with the leper and all who seek God, we will know ourselves touched anew by Jesus' outstretched hand.