

READING MARK AS A MANUAL FOR DISCIPLESHIP

DISCOVERING MARK'S JESUS

My own journey with Mark's Jesus began over thirty years ago as a theology student in Durham, where I was introduced to Mark's gospel and the world of New Testament studies by James Dunn. He told us in his first lecture how he found his faith nurtured and deepened by the close study of the biblical texts; that is something he managed to pass on to me, for which I am enduringly grateful.

Yet it was a doctoral student in Cambridge, wrestling with my own part as a Rhodesian Special branch detective in the Zimbabwean bush war, that I rediscovered Mark's Jesus, and he saved my faith. Agonising over how I came to be involved in what I had done as a keen young Christian, I found Mark's radical Jesus: the Jesus who had come to transform the world into God's Kingdom; who confronted the political, religious and economic powers and vested interests of his time (Rome and the temple system on behalf of its victims ("the least first"). This was not the Jesus of the churches I had known. Nor were those churches Mark's church - communities of disciples that were signs of the transformed world that Jesus proclaimed. It was from reading Mark that I realised that the Christian church always hangs in the balance between being a sign of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and being part of that from which the world needs saving. That was equally true of me - and of all would-be followers of Jesus.

Mark writes to call his readers to follow Jesus. Discipleship is a journey of formation and transformation - of becoming more recognisably like Jesus. Becoming Jesus-shaped churches, filled with Jesus-shaped people, and making a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of people and communities: that is a vision worth pursuing. It is what Christian faith and being church ought to be about. There is no better place to begin that journey than with Mark's Jesus.

THE TASK OF TRANSLATION

Translation occupies the space between transliteration (simply translating Mark's Greek words into their English equivalents) and paraphrase (using my own words to interpret the meaning of what Mark says). Translation requires faithfulness to Mark's text (the words he uses; the style in which he writes) and, where interpretation is unavoidable, transparency and fidelity to the story that Mark is telling. A good translation will make Mark's story more "visible", as well as intelligible.

The text I have used is the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament. I have tried to retain Mark's sparse style of writing, so I have consciously resisted the temptation to smooth it out, or expand his vocabulary to keep the interest of the reader (as we are taught to do in essay-writing classes).

I have also tried to reproduce Mark's trademark story-telling style: the constant use of "immediately" that makes every second with Jesus fraught with significance, and hurtles the reader through the story so that there is no "down time" - no ordinary time. It is *kairos* time (God

time), rather than *chronos* (time measured by a clock). Similarly, it is clear that Mark wants his readers to experience Jesus' sayings as (literally) earth-shattering - which is why he has taken care to preserve them. I have opted to indicate this by using exclamation marks.

Where Mark's meaning is less than clear, and choices about interpretation need to be made (particularly in his use of symbol to frame the Easter story), I have tried to indicate where and how I move more toward interpretation than direct translation. I have, however, felt free to make clear the subjects of his story when Mark simply uses pronouns ("he", "they", "them").

Reading Mark's gospel as Missional Disciples

To read Mark's story of Jesus as missional disciples is to make a deliberate choice about the lens through which we read the gospel in order to "see Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day". It is to choose quite deliberately to read the gospel as individuals and church communities who are on a journey of discipleship with Jesus, seeking to be transformed and shaped to be more and more recognisably like him.

This is not simply a practical decision about the best approach to read the gospel with this goal in mind. The conviction is that, by reading the gospel through this particular lens, we put ourselves in the same place as Mark's original audience, reading the story that Mark wrote with the express intention of calling his own contemporaries to follow Jesus.

Reading through this particular lens is to encounter Mark's Jesus for ourselves. This is the carpenter from Nazareth, whose mission to transform the world into the Kingdom of God - a world in which the poorest go to the front of the queue and the richest and most powerful to the back - put him on a deadly collision course with the political and religious powers of his day. The road that Jesus calls his disciples to walk led inexorably to a Roman cross. It was not a road that the disciples - the "first church" - wished to walk, any more than Mark's own church members did in his time.

Read through this lens, Mark's gospel presents us with Jesus' same call and challenge as the contemporary church: to follow the Way of the Cross and to share in the message and mission of the Kingdom. This is what it means to be the church. But this is not the only possible reading lens.

For the best part of three hundred years, scholars have deliberately tried to prise the memories of the historical Jesus loose from the narrative framework in which Mark preserves them. This is in order to recover the "real Jesus" from the character whom Mark has created for his tale. It was assumed that he had taken Peter's eyewitness accounts of incidents in Jesus' life and "strung them together like pearls on a string" by using a rather clumsy narrative framework. The unfortunate result was to obscure the "real Jesus" from view, and the scholar's task in service of the church was to dig beneath the story to recover the historical Jesus of Nazareth, so that contemporary disciples could follow Jesus faithfully in their own, very different contexts.

Once Jesus' words and actions (his mission) were divorced from their meaning and significance given to them by the picture Mark so carefully painted, a very different Jesus emerged. Far from being a revolutionary whose mission was to change the world, Jesus was seen as spiritual teacher whose primary aim was to show people how to live in such a way that they would "get to heaven when they died". During the last century, he was interpreted as someone who was (wrongly) convinced that God was about to bring about the end of the world; the world would disappear and time would be replaced by eternity. Although Jesus was mistaken, what the church gained was a "timeless Jesus" - an other-worldly Jesus completely divorced from his own specific context, passing on "eternal truths" to disciples in every time, nation and context.

This was the Jesus of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism - the bastion of bourgeois middle class respectability and private, individual faith. He proved to be the Jesus who could be recruited in the service of imperial conquest and empire-building by the so-called "Christian" western powers. Two world wars created a fresh crisis. The German theologian, Karl Barth, was devastated that the German church and his own biblical teachers - the most renowned Christian scholars in the world - could support first the Kaiser and then Hitler. He established the tiny but hugely influential Confessing Church in the conviction that the church had lost its way completely because it had lost Jesus.

The post-war period saw the dismantling of the colonial empires of Britain, Germany, France and Portugal - often as a result of liberation struggles against colonial occupation. It was a time of huge upheaval, in which the "old world order" was coming to an end. That was mirrored in the world of biblical scholarship. Theologians from the Third World - the victims of empire - exposed the way in which abandoning the story had resulted in turning the Jesus who championed the poor and oppressed people into the exact opposite of what Jesus had proclaimed and for which he was crucified. Biblical scholarship was at last redirected to pay close attention to Mark's story in order to rediscover the "real Jesus" and call the church to a fresh and very different way of following him.

This was the matrix out of which our lens has emerged and gained widespread support and prominence during the past forty years. Far from trying to prise Jesus loose from Mark's narrative, it pays very close attention to the story. It focuses on the ways in which Jesus and his mission were not only Good News to the most marginalised, but also confronted the Empire and the religious system of his day that had become co-opted into maintaining the status quo. In other words, it pays close attention to the political, social, economic and religious implications of following Jesus.

But it also pays careful attention to the disciples as symbols of "the church" in every age, called to free following and mission. Traditional readings of Mark viewed the disciples as caricatures - "fall guys", - whose purpose was to focus attention on Jesus. Blind Bartimaeus, for example, was a foil to the obtuse disciples because he "saw" Jesus clearly in ways to which they were "blind". Their very obtuseness was therefore a narrative device, employed by Mark to "big Jesus up".

The church reading through a missional discipleship lens, by contrast, recognises themselves clearly in the mirror of the disciples. This is, after all, the church that had managed to be blind to the evils of the Inquisition, slavery, the subjugation of women, colonialism, the Holocaust, Apartheid, the persecution of gay people, Segregation and the Ku Klux Klan. Following Jesus is not easy; we are always blind to our own context in ways in which we see other contexts far more clearly. One of Mark's purposes in telling the "warts and all" story of the disciples is to provide a mirror against which to measure ourselves critically and live out faithfully in our own context what discipleship entails.

To be the church is to live by the stories of Jesus... And like him, we will be experienced as Good News - individually and as churches - in a world that is desperately hungry for Good News. That is what it means to be "Jesus-shaped church" today.

MARK'S GOSPEL: DATE AND CONTEXT

Deciding the date and circumstances under which Mark wrote his gospel (when, where, why, to whom?) is always and inevitably a matter of intelligent guesswork and deduction. Did he write to a church community based in Rome, for instance, or was he writing for community based in Northern Palestine - a community both temporally and geographically close to the world of Jesus (as is assumed here)?

It is clear from the text (particularly chapter 13) that Mark writes around the time of the Great Revolt against the Roman Occupation, either shortly before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Depending on your decision, chapter 13 is either about Jesus foreseeing and warning against the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple within the lifetime of some of his hearers (see Mark 13:30), or about Jesus (mistakenly) predicting the end of the world and human history within that same period.

Here's the issue: what we assume about the date, context and purpose of Mark's writing will influence how we read and understand his story. At the same time, almost all of our evidence for what we assume about the time and context comes from his gospel! There is no way of escaping this circularity. That is why I talk about "intelligent guesswork and deduction": we cannot prove that our assumptions are correct; we can only show that they make the best sense of the story before us. With that caveat in mind, I want to suggest that the following outline most helpfully illuminates the way in which we understand what we are reading:

Mark writes during a time of crisis - the Great Revolt against the Roman Occupation (66-73CE). He writes shortly before the destruction of the temple (70CE) - most likely in 69CE. Roman storm troopers are advancing south down through Galilee towards Jerusalem, operating a "scorched earth" policy. They are ruthlessly stamping out the rebellion; their progress is marked by the crosses of the crucified rebels.

At the same time, Mark's own church community is under enormous pressure from two sides: the rebels, on the one hand, are interpreting the revolt as the Final Battle - the messianic war to free Israel from foreign domination once and for all, so that it can be God's Kingdom. Israel is

living in the End Times, and it is the duty of every faithful Jew to join the rebellion. The Romans, on the other hand, are ruthlessly persecuting the church. There is enormous pressure on the members both to abandon their faith and to sell their brothers and sisters out to the authorities in exchange for their own lives.

Mark writes to urge his followers to resist both these pressures. Jesus, like the rebels, is a revolutionary, whose mission was to transform this world into the Kingdom of God. That meant the downfall of Rome. It also meant the end of the religious temple-state, which Jesus regarded as terminally corrupt. Mark re-tells the story of Jesus who ends up crucified as God's freedom fighter (or as a terrorist, if you are looking at it through Roman eyes). But Jesus' revolution is not to be accomplished by revolutionary violence. That would simply mimic Rome and all the other empires stretching back to Pharaoh's Egypt in the time of Moses. Peace and freedom are not won by political accommodation and military conquest; they are won by sweeping away that whole world order and establishing peace and justice for the empire's victims first of all.

The faithful response to the situation for Mark's followers of Jesus is neither despair nor revolutionary violence, but to follow Jesus ever more closely, paying attention to the way in which the church's current situation echoes the mission of Jesus of Nazareth, who called the first disciples to be a New Community that lived out what the world would look like when God's promised Kingdom came. It would certainly come; the powers that he had tried once before to crush Jesus, and appeared to have won, but God had raised Jesus from the dead. The risen Jesus had called the disciples to follow him again in his mission of transforming this world into the Kingdom of God - to be a Jesus-shaped church, filled with Jesus-shaped people, making a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of the people and communities facing the Roman onslaught.

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Advent 2017