

Bible Studies

"MISSION AT A TURNING POINT"

"DISCIPLESHIP"

Mark 3:13-35

INTRODUCTION

It never ceases to amaze me that Mark made it into the canon of the New Testament. It speaks of such failure on the part of the disciples, more crass and blatant than in the other three gospels. It is a quite incredible statement of the sense of power of the grace of God and the Holy Spirit's guidance that Mark and I and II Corinthians were included, for they are documents of human failure too.

MARK 3: 13-35

Let us look at the main lines of the passage:

13-19: Jesus goes to an uninhabited place in which to set apart the nucleus of the New Israel, the Twelve (cf. Mt. 19: 28; Lk. 22:30). They are

(a) to be with him;
(b) to proclaim the Good News Event, and
(c) to interact with the forces of evil (casting out devils). Then they are named. Many we do not know of. However, the sociological work on Galilee of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and Sean Freyne (e.g. S. Freyne, Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels) is important here. Fishing in the Sea of Galilee in the economic circumstances of the First Century was big business. Galilean fishing syndicates were raising credit a thousand kilometres from their operations. Although fishing is not explicitly mentioned here, the name of one of the syndicates ("Sons of Zebedee") is given. These were no lakeside bumpkins; they were major operators. The name "Peter" ("Rocky": Kephas) is a dig at subsequent failure. So is "Sons of Thunder" ("Boanerges"). Simon is a Zealot, a member of a fairly radical nationalist movement. We are dealing with an influential group of competent operators.

20-21: Two factors are significant here: Jesus' immense popularity and therefore opportunity to influence the people; and the way in which he unnerves the people with his exousia ("authority").

22-27: In the Mt./Lk. version (Q/Mt. 12:22-26; Lk. 11:14-18) this Beelzebub controversy follows from an exorcism. There is academic discussion over the spelling of Beelzebub vs Beelzebul. Beelzebub was the god of Ekron (II Kg. 1:2). The point is: Jesus is seen from the side of Jerusalem (regarded in Mark as the place of evil) as an Evil Force. Therefore, his controversy with Judaism is seen in terms of a fight of spirits. Verse 27 reminds us of Isaiah 49: 24-25. All this is "parable", i.e. a story presenting an existential crisis for the hearers.

28-30: The central point of the section. What is this sin against the Holy Spirit? It has to do with Jesus' very being.

31-35: A whole new understanding of community and even of existence is represented here. One's very being is related to one's relatives; so the sociological studies of Galilee reinforce.

It seems fairly certain that Mark was put together in Rome around 70 CE/AD. Its connections with Galilee too are very important.

Let us imagine its situation.

The Neronian persecution has taken place. Tacitus sets out for us the appalling record of what happened to members of the Roman Church:

"They were not only put to death but put to death with insult, in that they were dressed up in the skins of beasts to perish either by the worrying of dogs or on crosses or by fire or, when the daylight failed, they were burnt to serve as lights by night." (Gwatkin's translation, Vol 1, p78)

Tradition, accepted by the church in the absence of other evidence, records that the two leading apostles, Peter and Paul, perished in this onslaught. This would be devastating for the mixed Gentile/Jewish church. It would not be surprising if the number of apostates was high. How many would be able to face up to the prospect of an agonising death by fire or crucifixion or being torn apart by dogs, deliberately starved to make them more vicious? It should be noted that, from very early days, the concept of the believer being identified with his Lord in suffering and death appears to have loomed large. Paul seeks a share e.g. in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10); he seeks to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ as an "example to the members of the church to follow his steps" (2.21f). The passage on fasting is an example. It has to do with the death of Jesus and the fasting expressive of sorrow that belongs to that time. The present time with Jesus present is the time of joy. It is also the time of the presence of Peter, and the period of a wedding celebration: "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?. The days will come when the groom is taken away from them. And then on that day they will fast" (2.19f). The verb *apairo* can imply a use of force. Jesus was "torn away" from the twelve and the church by the crucifixion. Similarly Peter (and Paul) shared this experience of being "torn away" by hostile authorities and martyred. The church in the aftermath of the persecution of 64AD knew something of the distress expressed at the time of the violent death of Jesus and it could take comfort in this identification.

The believing community at Rome we can surmise had its own considerable portion of defectors. It may have been expressed in all sorts of ways, giving up membership of the community and so not being brought before the authorities; keeping their identify secret; clearing out altogether in an act of sheer panic and yet wanting back; under the strain of torture and its physical agony reaching breaking point and willy-nilly denying Christ; perhaps there were those within the community who betrayed others to the authorities for gain, a pagan son his Christian father or a pagan mother her converted daughter, utterly resentful of her leaving the pagan gods. The list of failures could be multiplied. The unit on sin without forgiveness could meet such a situation "All sins and transgressions will be forgiven" – what a sweeping statement! Then the salutary finish: "but the sin against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven" (28-30). Many of those who had failed had never lost their faith in Christ. If in a moment of agony and stress, they lost their true identify in an involuntary denial; they had never in their hearts lost touch with Christ. Perhaps there were those who thought that there was no acceptance for them. Their sin was too great, too heinous.

MARK 8: 27-38

This section is the beginning of the second major part of Mark's Gospel. The first part, up until 8: 26, is crammed full of activity on the part of Jesus. He heals, he teaches, he moves from one place to another. Crowds are drawn to him; Jewish leaders begin to show their opposition. Two impressions, among others, are left: the furious activity of Jesus. and in addition a strange inability on the part of his closest followers to understand what he is about.

From our passage (i.e. from 8:27) it is of a different kind altogether. It moves more leisurely. We are now made to think about Jesus and what he is about. The structure is that of a journey. It begins with Jesus as far away from his own area as possible, out in pagan Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi, the ancient Paneas, on the slopes of Mount Hermon, was rebuilt by Herod Philip, whose name it bears to distinguish it from Caesarea on the coast, the seal of the Roman government. Mark traces a journey which Jesus makes as he moves south from there through Galilee, along the Jordan through Jericho and up to Jerusalem. On this journey Jesus teaches his

disciples about himself and about how they are to be disciples. It is no chance that this takes place on a journey, it is a kind of pilgrimage. Mark draws this out by continually referring to Jesus as being on the way or on the road at the head of his disciples.

Although he begins in pagan Caesarea Philippi, strangely he enters deeper and deeper into the area of estrangement from God as he reaches the so-called Holy City of Jerusalem. We know from earlier, in Chapter 3, that the struggle between him and the authorities from Jerusalem begins in Galilee. He is associated with Galilee, they are associated with Jerusalem. Each side points to the power of evil spirits in the other. For Jerusalem stands over against God's apocalyptic act in Jesus.

But what does Jesus teach his disciples about himself on this pilgrimage to the estranged city? - this anti-pilgrimage? Chiefly what is going to happen to him; he says it on three different occasions: "I am going to be delivered into the hands of men/people who will kill me; and when I am killed, after three days I will rise". This is to happen in Jerusalem; hence the journey is a journey to that place. We can see by now how the end of the story is beginning to dominate what precedes it. The three predictions that Jesus makes of what is going to happen to him are brief. They do not need to be lengthy. Mark's readers already know the full story and what is going to happen when Jesus reaches Jerusalem.

However, each time Mark gives one of the predictions he goes on immediately to drive home its implications for the disciples. If he is about to take up his cross, then they must take up theirs. If he is not about to demand his rights as a true leader of the Jewish people and so be saved by God from humiliation, then they too must learn what in fact it means to be humble, and he sets before them a child and tells them that their behaviour should resemble the child's. If he is king of the Jews and does not assert his kingship with worldly authority, then they must learn that the ideal for them is not ruling over people but serving others as a slave does.

If the religious centre of Judaism is to demonstrate that it is, in fact, the centre of estrangement and alienation from God, the Jesus' way of pilgrimage is the opposite. It is God's anti-pilgrimage, over against Jewish pilgrimages. God in Christ becomes totally alienated from religiosity, from playing religion, by hanging on a gibbet close to a Holy Feast. God in Christ enters into full humiliation in religious terms, if religiosity, playing religion, means demonstrating religious rights. God in Christ becomes the slave of all, if civil religiosity, playing civil religion, means asserting that he behave in Jerusalem's terms as to how that estranged place thinks a king of the Jews should behave.

Those, like Peter, who do not see that, are indeed Satan, standing, like Jerusalem, against the way of the presence of God in Jesus Christ. So Jesus links his fate to the way of discipleship. In that way Mark makes our understanding of Christian life depend on our understanding of God's action in Christ. It should be noted that, from the earliest days of Christianity in Rome, the concept of the believer being identified with his or her Lord in suffering, death and resurrection appears to have loomed large. Paul seeks a share, e.g., in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3: 10). He asks to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1: 24). Peter, in 1 Peter (2: 21 - 22), talks of the vicarious suffering of Christ as an "Example to the members of the church to follow his steps".

So Christian discipleship is comprehensible only in Christ. This stands in stark contrast to the outwardly successful activities of the Pharisees. They most successfully in first century Judaism were able to combine sectarian movements and mainline aspirations. They were outstanding experts in propagating religious comprehensiveness. However, Christian discipleship stands over against successes. For Christian discipleship is only comprehended in God's strange actions in Jesus' anti-religiosity pilgrimage. Our identity in him comes from God; it is given to us by God's grace. It stands over against all self-conscious discipleships, all posings, all self-validated pilgrimages with predetermined outcomes, and optimal results. Despite ourselves, it is given to us. For Jesus, in his resurrection message speaks first to Peter, the one who has gone further

than the other disciples in denying Jesus, the one who goes against God's will, and says that he is going before him into Galilee, the place not estranged by religiosity. There he will see him, as he told him. Discipleship is not self-justification; it is gift.

CONCLUSIONS

The following factors need to be noted:

1. Those called to be disciples are confrontational to religious institutions.
2. The situation in Rome was a re-run of Passion Week. So it is for all Christian life and existence.

APOSTLESHIP

Acts 9: 1-19

"Damascus Road"

INTRODUCTION

There is a phrase which is sometimes used : a Damascus road experience. What is such an experience? Acts contains three accounts of what happened to Paul: 9:1-19, 22:4-16, 26:9-18. There has been much discussion whether these describe a conversion or a commission or something else. The account occurs three times in Acts, apart from the references to it in the Pauline letters. Why was it given so much significance? Who was this Paul, about whom it is written, anyway? The Acts of Paul and Thecla, Section 3, describe him as follows: "A sturdy little bald-headed, bow-legged man, with meeting eyebrows and a rather prominent nose."

He was a very major problem to the Early Church. First, the ablest arch-enemy of Christianity had become its most articulate evangelist. Second, and perhaps even more problematic, was Paul already a missionary before his conversion, taking part in a Jewish proselytising campaign? (Schoeps and Bornkamm). The evidence is somewhat elusive. In part it consists of the unspoken presumption that the Christian Paul could not have taken such an overwhelming interest in the Gentiles if, before he met with Christ, he had not also been concerned about their fate. More substantial evidence may be found in Gal. 5:11 where Paul asks, "And I, my friends, if I am still advocating circumcision, why is it I am still persecuted?" From this it has been assumed that before his Christian baptism Paul had practised the calling of a Jewish preacher of circumcision. However, the juxtaposition of two "stills" means that this interpretation is not necessarily implied. We might draw a picture of Paul being heavily involved before his conversion in a Jewish proselytising campaign. This would certainly help us to see his later struggles in a new light.

ACTS 9: 1-19

Against this background we have a picture of a number of events occurring for Paul: the call-vision is the tradition of Jeremiah, the reception of the Holy Spirit, and baptism. The conversion is separated by three days from the reception of the Spirit and baptism.

Let us overview the passage:

1-9: Paul, the arch-enemy of the Christians, is presented, armed with letters presumably from the Jerusalem Sanhedrin to the synagogues of the Jewish community in Damascus, a major Jewish colony. It may have had close connections with the Qumran community. The right to arrest Jewish fugitives is mentioned in 1 Mac.15:21. The three accounts differ in detail but agree on the central conversation between Jesus and Paul:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Tell me, Lord", he said, "who are you." The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

It is not clear whether Paul alone heard Jesus (22:9) or also those journeying with him (9:7), whether he alone saw the light (20:11) or whether those also with him (22:9; 26:13 – strangely unlike Paul they are not made blind by the light). These variations seem not significant, for there is no indication that anyone other than Paul saw Jesus. We can safely conclude that Paul's experience was quite different from that of any of his fellow travellers.

10-19: A number of factors indicate that Paul's three-day experience was a unified crisis, extending from his conversion and re-orienting right through to this reception of the Spirit and his baptism. First, in the three accounts there is no distinction between the commissioning he receives on the road and that which he receives from Ananias. In ch.9 the commissioning comes solely through Ananias; in Ch.26 the whole commission is received outside Damascus. Paul, it appears, did not distinguish the means and the times of God's dealings with him. It was all the one event and experience, and it was impossible to disentangle the various elements in it.

Second, Paul's blindness lasts for three days. From the background above we can see that his entire world-view had been shaken, especially if he had been a Jewish proselytiser. He was not converted in an instant. That is what the blindness means. He was shattered. He had to let the pieces of his shattered life re-assemble themselves round the new fact which had broken in upon him. It was only when this was done, and this faith had been re-created from its deepest levels, that he was ready to take that step of commitment after which he could not go back.

Third, in ch.22, Ananias has to persuade him to take the final step of baptism. It all runs together: conversion, a sense of commissioning, re-orientation, receiving the Holy Spirit and baptism.

Note: in verse 5, Paul calls Jesus "Lord" (kurie); this could equally be "sir" or "the one who clearly is putting me in subjection". Again: in verse 17 Ananias calls Paul "brother" (adelphos); it is used 19 times in Acts to mean "fellow Jew".

CALL-VISION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

A number of factors need to be borne in mind here:

First, there is the very important phrase in 1 Cor. 15:8. Within I Cor.15:8, there are two expressions which require a little further examination. Of the first of these, "last of all", could be taken to mean "least in importance", and this would agree with verse 9. "Extromati" has been variously translated into English. It probably means something like "an abortion". This can hardly be taken in a strictly literal sense but might signify that he had been born before his time or without the preparation necessary, the preparation which the other apostles had through their earthly fellowship with Jesus. It is likely that the term was not his own choice but had been used about him by his critics "that he was as much an ugly parody of a true apostle as an abortion is of a healthy infant born at the proper time," Paul uses it against himself. Yet he went through the call-vision, gift of the Spirit and baptism experience. This was the miracle.

Second, the coming of the Spirit overcame the Evil Inclination, or "yeser harã" in him. In popular Judaism the Evil Inclination was in all people, for Jews it could be partially controlled by strict adherence to the Law. It is referred to in the Damascus Document (CD) 19:20-23:

"Each man did what was good in his eyes, and each one chose the stubbornness of his heart, and they kept not themselves from the people and its sin but lived in license deliberately, walking in the ways of the wicked, of whom God said, "Their wine is the poison of serpents and the head of asps is cruel" (Deut 32:33). The serpents are the kings of the peoples and their wine is their ways".

At Qumran, the "stubbornness of his heart" (syrwt lbw) is synonymous with "the thought of his yeser,": as the Manual of Discipline 5:4-5 shows. The Torah, for them, would be the antidote to

rabbinic traditions. Paul, however, discerns an antinomy between being "led by the spirit" and being "under the Law" (Gal 5:18). For him the Spirit alone, sundered from the Torah, is the antidote to the yeser, and in Gal 5:17, Paul goes on to describe the battle between the yeser and the Spirit. For Paul, the change to his life comes from the outpouring of the Spirit of God, and the recreation of humanity.