

Lectio Divina – 5th Sunday - Year B

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- The Gospel is an 'action story', things happen quickly. Mark's use of 'immediately' occurs so often in the Gospel that the word is often omitted from translations.
- The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us – well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. One moment they can be admirable and the next so very dense, lacking all comprehension of what is really happening. Discipleship is a big concern in this Gospel. (Jude Siciliano OP)
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 1:29-39

- The story of Jesus' day in Capernaum last week continues in the Gospel for this Sunday. This is the first day of Jesus' public ministry and it is the Sabbath, the Lord's Day.
- There are 3 episodes in this Gospel reading:
 - Cure of Simon's mother-in-law
 - Healing of diseases and possessions
 - Jesus prays in a lonely place and then leaves for other parts of Galilee
- Leaving the synagogue Jesus goes 'straight' (immediately) to the house of Simon (Peter) and Andrew with James and John. There are no other disciples at this stage.
- Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever – a feared thing in the ancient world with vague overtones of evil due to shaking, sweating, delirious behaviour.
- Notice that Jesus says nothing – he takes her by the hand, breaking a double taboo (touching the sick and risking ritual impurity, and a man touching a woman with whom he was not related). Jesus frequently does this in the healing stories. It is Mark's way of saying that God's compassion and mercy cannot be limited by Jewish law and practice. This is also obvious in the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees & scribes.
- The fever leaves her and she waits on them – indicates the immediacy and completeness of the cure. Notice that the woman is healed and restored to her rightful place as hospitality-provider (a sacred ministry in Jewish life) in the

household. Jesus' miracles are never just about curing the physical or spiritual; in the process of healing people are restored to the rightful place.

- Notice that in last week's Gospel, Jesus cures the possessed man with his word. In this week's Gospel, he cures the woman with his touch.
- That evening, after sunset, after the Sabbath day was over, people begin to bring the sick and possessed to Jesus for healing.
- Notice how 'local' all these things appear to be: a local man in the local synagogue at Capernaum, a local woman (notice the gender balance), local people crowd around the door, local people are brought for healing.
- In all the healing stories, Mark presents Jesus in *conversation* with *each individual*. There are no 'en masse' healings - each person get individual treatment - sometimes with words, sometimes by touch, sometimes with both. There is a sense of intimacy between Jesus and the person healed as Mark tells the story.
- Luke has a story about ten lepers being cured at once. He has probably taken Mark's story about the cure of one leper (next week's Gospel) and magnified it.
- Jesus will certainly sit and teach the crowd at length, worry over it and feed the hungry crowd, but the restoration to health and wholeness only happen individually - one-to-one with Jesus.
- 'He would not allow them (the devils) to speak because they knew who he was'. In Mark's Gospel (but often also in the others) these preternatural beings know immediately who Jesus is. Their human counterparts (represented by the disciples) need a fuller picture and a longer time to come to recognise exactly who Jesus is. The true identity of Jesus is only revealed on the Cross.
- Next morning, long before dawn, Jesus gets up and goes to a lonely place (away from other people - not the desert) to pray. Mark shows Jesus as being in communion both with God and with people.
- Simon and the others find him and beg him to go back to where, 'Everybody is looking for you.' But, instead, Jesus says, '...let's go to the neighbouring towns and preach there, because that is why I came.'
- Jesus' preaching and healing in not only for the people of Capernaum, but for the whole people of Galilee.

The Liturgical Context - why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for this Sunday?

The first reading this Sunday is from the book of Job - a theological reflection on and wrestling with the mystery of innocent suffering. Job, a once wealthy man who had everything, loses his family, wealth, standing in the community and his own health. His friends try to offer various explanations for Job's suffering and finally conclude that he must be a sinner. The mystery of human suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent, is rarely answered by simple explanations - that's why it's a mystery. In the end, the mystery of Job's suffering overwhelms him. He knows he is not a sinner. He knows he is a just and honest man. He does not know why so many bad things have happened to him. He is in the depths of despair.

The story of Jesus' first day of ministry in Capernaum continues in the Gospel for this Sunday. After leaving the synagogue where he has healed the possessed man Jesus goes to Simon's house. He heals Simon's mother-in-law and restores her to her rightful place as hospitality provider - a sacred ministry in Jewish households. No words are spoken. Jesus simply holds her hand and helps her up. In doing so he would have broken taboos about touching a sick person, and touching a woman to whom he was not related. But in Mark's Gospel law and custom cannot stand in the way of God's healing power.

That evening, after sunset, after the Sabbath day was over, people begin to bring the sick and possessed to Jesus for healing.

Notice how 'local' all these elements of Mark's story are: a local man in the local synagogue, a local woman in her own house, local people crowd around the door, local people are brought for healing.

In all the healing stories, Mark presents Jesus in conversation with each individual. There are no 'en masse' healings – each person gets individual treatment – sometimes with words, sometimes by touch, sometimes both. There is a sense of intimacy in Jesus' healing ministry.

Interestingly, the devils seem to know exactly who Jesus is, but the human beings take much longer to recognise Jesus.

In the early morning Jesus goes off to pray by himself. Jesus prays both in public worship in the Synagogue and in moments of quiet communion with God. Mark helps us understand that both are necessary for would-be disciples. Jesus begins and ends his day in prayer.

When they find Jesus the disciples beg him to return to the town, but Jesus has other ideas. His preaching and healing is not only for the people of Capernaum, but for the whole people of Galilee.

No doubt, the disciples enjoyed being in the presence of such a wonder-worker as Jesus! But Jesus' focus is not himself; it is his mission of proclaiming the Good News of God's love through healing words and actions. The healing stories underline the idea that contact with God through the person of Jesus brings healing and wholeness, not death and destruction.

The preaching of Jesus together with the healing/wholeness stories is fundamentally about the transformation of real, living human beings into the new People of God.

What do you think the disciples are learning as they live through these events?

What might be our role as disciples in communion with God and bringing wholeness to each other?