

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.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 8:27-35 – things to notice

- We skip forward a whole chapter from last Sunday's Gospel
- The text for this Sunday's Gospel begins a section of instruction which Jesus gives his disciples. We will read various parts of that teaching about Jesus' identity and about discipleship for the next six weeks.
- Most of this teaching takes place on a journey from Caesarea Philippi (well north of the Sea of Galilee) to Jerusalem where Jesus will meet his fate. Why does Mark have Jesus begin his journey to Jerusalem from a place so far from Jerusalem and with so many Imperial overtones?
- The teaching begins with the Gospel episode today which has three parts: 1. a question about who Jesus is; 2. Jesus' teaching about his destiny and Peter's response; 3. Jesus' teaching about being a disciple of his.

Section 1

- On the way from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi Jesus poses a question about his own identity to the disciples, 'Who do people say I am?'
- The disciples answer, 'John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets'.
- Note that 'Messiah' is not among the popular identifications of Jesus in the list.
- Jesus poses the question again, but with a difference, 'Who do *you* say I am?'
- Peter answers: 'You are the Christ.' *Christ* is the Greek version of the Hebrew word for *Messiah* – both words mean 'anointed'.
- Jesus gives strict order that the disciples remain silent, probably to avoid any misunderstanding about what kind of a Messiah he is.

Section 2

- Jesus then begins to unfold his Messiahship as one of suffering, death and resurrection.
- Note that Jesus does not use the term, 'Messiah', but 'Son of Man' – a frequent expression in Mark derived from the Old Testament.
- Rejection by elders, chief priests & scribes – note the absence of the Pharisees.

- Jesus talks about his suffering and death quite 'openly' ('boldly' is a better translation).
- Peter rejects Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death. Though he understands correctly who Jesus is (the Messiah, the One who is to come) he seems to misunderstand what kind of Messiah Jesus is. Perhaps Peter is hoping for the popular image of a messiah who would liberate Israel from Roman occupation. Peter seeks to dissuade Jesus from his purpose. He cannot comprehend such an end for Jesus.
- Seeing the other disciples nearby, Jesus sternly rebukes Peter, calling him 'Satan' and telling him that his thinking is all wrong – he is not thinking with God's heart (way) but man's.
- Unlike the true Peter, man of faith (above), this Peter is Satan. This presents an interesting image of a disciple who can both act with great faith *and* with such limited insight into the life and mission of Jesus. Maybe he is like many would-be disciples(?)
- For Mark, those who deny the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus stand on the side of Satan – opposed to God. This may be a reference to some people in Mark's community. In the New Testament scriptures there is often a struggle among believers to accept the leadership of a crucified Messiah – what is often referred to as the 'scandal of the cross', a stumbling block for unbelievers, but also for some believers.

Section 3

- Then Jesus unfolds his teaching to the people and to the disciples. (Where did the people come from??):
- If you want to be my follower you must renounce yourself – means to renounce your false identity
- Take up your cross – the journey of Christian discipleship is a journey through death to new life. It is the business of finding our true identity by letting go of who we think we are (in terms of wealth, power, position, knowledge, skill, etc) and coming to know ourselves, through Christ, as God's beloved sons and daughters, AND it is the business of being committed to service of others. It is the business of 'dying to self' not as an ascetical practice, but as the means of becoming who we truly are as God's beloved sons and daughters, and coming to see each other also as God's beloved sons and daughters.
- Saving life/losing life – those who can't/won't make the journey will lose their Lives (true life) in the attempt to save their life according to this world.
- Those who lose their life according to this world, for Christ and for the sake of the Gospel – that is by DOING the gospel - are the ones who will have true Life. This is not about martyrdom in the classic sense. This is not about having eternal life, it is also about living our true lives as God's beloved sons and daughters by doing the Gospel in this world. That true life will find its final fulfilment in the heavenly manifestation of the Kingdom.

The Liturgical Context

The First Reading comes from the Book of Isaiah. It is one of the passages about the 'suffering servant of God'. Note the servant's characteristics: he is a listener to the Word of God who, as a result, meets with violent opposition but refuses to retaliate. He puts his trust and hope in the Lord and boldly steps forward to do the work of God.

As such it sets the scene for Jesus presenting himself not as a warrior-king but as God's suffering servant who brings life through his suffering and death.

Reflection

This week the readings share a common theme of confidence in God even in the midst of suffering.

In the Gospel Jesus, the true Messiah, appears not as a glorious God-King but as the Suffering Servant of God about whom Isaiah speaks in the first reading. The way of discipleship is not about self-glory but about true service, and about discovering our true identity as God's beloved sons and daughters.

As disciples of Jesus we try to live our lives as a real service to our brothers and sisters in the world. But it's not possible to do that until and unless we realise our true identity as God's own people. Then we become a source of love, mercy, hope, compassion, justice, truth, concern and Christian action as servants of God and each other. That is **DOING** the Gospel.

Extended Reflection

All of us, at least to some extent, shape our identity and measure ourselves in response to the comments and ideas of others. From an early age we are taught how to speak, dress and act in order to be 'acceptable' to others. Usually this is a good thing, but sometimes it can go horribly wrong.

Celebrities, sports stars and young people can become so vulnerable to the expectations and reactions of the public, media and social media trolls that they end up with little identity of their own, or they develop a very distorted idea of their identity. Unfortunately, both these experiences have significant negative impacts on a person's mental wellbeing.

This Sunday's Gospel teaches us how to find our true identity.

Both the 'people' and Peter have ideas about who Jesus is. For the people he is John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets returned from the dead. For Peter, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. But what happens next reveals that Peter and Jesus have very different ideas about who Jesus is.

Though Peter understands correctly that Jesus is the Messiah, he misunderstands the kind of Messiah that Jesus is. Perhaps he wanted a Messiah who was a great warrior-king, powerful and glorious. He can't imagine that his Messiah would meet the kind of end that Jesus talks about.

Jesus calls Peter, 'Satan'. If Peter is to learn the true identity of Jesus and come to think with God's heart, he must 'get behind' (follow) Jesus.

Such followers are called to renounce their false identity (often defined by what we have, what we work at, our delusions) and to find their true identity as God's beloved son or daughter in Christ through a life poured out in loving service (taking up his/her cross).

I often think that parents are the great examples of what all this means. They constantly have to go beyond themselves, their own needs, hopes, desires and sacrifice their time, energy and money to care for their children with love. In doing so, they often discover their very best selves.

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