

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 6:7-13 – things to notice

- Follows immediately from last Sunday's Gospel reading about Jesus' visit to his home town.
- Jesus sends out the disciples in pairs – on the practical level this could be about safety, on another level it is about each disciples confirming (bearing witness to) the words of the other.
- Various bands of travelling missionaries were common in the ancient world that was without newspapers, radio, TV and social media.
- 'Authority over unclean spirits' – Jesus directly involves the disciples in his own ministry of teaching and healing. Remember that *unclean spirits* were associated with illness (physical, psychological and spiritual) and disability in the ancient world.
- The disciples are to be unencumbered by many possessions; they are to travel 'light' – a staff and sandals (necessary for walking on the stony land) but no bread, no haversack, no money, so spare tunic (undergarment or vest worn next to the skin) and, it seems, no shoes.
- Perhaps the idea here is about not letting too many possessions get in the way of the proclamation. The primary job of the disciples is to preach, not to worry about possessions or even food and money.
- A second level is that the unencumbered disciples can meet most people by placing themselves in the same social and economic class as their audience. They are not presenting themselves as rich men, but as simple, and ordinary. Their appearance should not distract from their presentation of the Good News.
- The disciples are not to move from place to place – responding to the offer of, or actively seeking, better accommodation for themselves.
- Travelling missionaries depended on hospitality from the local people. These disciples are dependent on their hosts for everything (food, money, perhaps even clothing). What they have to offer is not material but spiritual.

- How to handle rejection – ‘shake the dust off your feet...’. Notice that just as the rejection of Jesus by his fellow townspeople which left him amazed and dumbstruck did not give rise to any violent retribution or punishment on his behalf, the same is true here: only a mild sign of silent rebuke is offered – no threats of thunder bolts or cataclysmic punishment.
- ‘They set off to preach repentance...’ – the central message of Jesus about recognising and turning again towards God. The disciples proclaim the same message as Jesus.
- ‘cast out many devils, anointed many sick people with oil and cured them’ – the fruit of the disciples proclamation of the Kingdom brings change of heart, freedom of spirit and healing of bodies – just like the preaching of Jesus does.

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

The first reading tells part of the story of the conflict between Amos the prophet and Amaziah, the priest of the royal sanctuary at Bethel in the rich and powerful northern kingdom of Israel. Amos is often called the ‘social justice prophet’ because of his fierce attacks against the rich and powerful who ignore the poor, weak and sick. Amos presents a direct challenge to all that Amaziah stands for – favouring the rich and powerful and condemning the poor and weak. Amos tells the people in the northern kingdom that they are not living according to God’s will and they will pay for it.

Amos is a foreigner in a foreign land. Amaziah basically tells him to get lost, to go back to where he came from; no one wants to listen to him, he is not even a recognised prophet! Amos acknowledges that he is not a recognised prophet and doesn’t belong to any of the recognised ‘bands of prophets’. He says that preaching in the northern kingdom was not his idea. He was happily looking after his sheep and his sycamore trees when God gave him his mission.

Reflection

As usual this first reading sets us up to hear the Gospel. An ordinary man like Amos was called and commissioned by God outside of all the formal structures to preach to Israel, to call the people to conversion so that they might live according to God’s heart. Amos was an ordinary man preaching to people who had become so lost in their wealth, power and self-importance that they could no longer read the face of God in the poor, weak and sick.

The disciples, too, are ordinary men. None, not even Jesus himself, is a formally commissioned or ordained rabbi, yet they are called and commissioned to preach and to heal.

The Gospel needs to be presented simply and truthfully and without affectation. The preaching disciple must make him/herself like the brothers and sisters to whom he dares preach. Perhaps a reminder that he/she is not above those to/for whom he/she preaches.

Too much wealth and too many possessions can easily get in the way of proclaiming the Gospel, as can an exalted sense of self-importance. Pope Francis is constantly warning priests and seminarians against clericalism (thinking they are above everyone else) and careerism (thinking more about self-advancement in the Church than about mission).

Not everyone will be able to hear or accept the message of the disciples, just as the townsfolk of Nazareth couldn’t perceive the presence of God in Jesus. But there is no firestorm of punishment. Jesus, though amazed and dumbstruck, does not retaliate with

violent retribution. Instead, he intensifies and multiplies his mission by sending out the disciples to other places. Where once there was only Jesus now there are 12 others spreading the Good News and healing. Disciples are called to proclaim God's love, not God's wrath.

It is ordinary people like you and me, not only those formally commissioned by the Church, who are called to read the face of God in ourselves, in others and in the world around us. We try not to get lost in our own power and wealth and self-importance which can easily blind us to the presence of God. We try to be people who become sacraments of God's presence for one another, who allow God to anoint God's people with acts of love, compassion, hope and healing.