

## 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 9:38-43, 45, 47-48 – things to notice

- Follows directly from last Sunday's Gospel. We are still in this section of Mark in which Jesus instructs the disciples.
- Having just heard Jesus' teaching about being humble servants, especially to the insignificant (last week's Gospel) John tells Jesus a story about trying to stop someone casting out devils in Jesus' name but who was not 'one of us'. The disciples still don't get it!
- An alternative reading of the text says that the disciples tried to stop the man because 'he was not a follower of ours'. This may suggest that the disciples are busily making their own disciples. But the true disciple is called to be a disciple of Jesus (which is what the man is) not a disciple of the disciples!
- Whichever version is correct, the disciples have set themselves up as judges about who is in and who is out (the disciples are 'in' and the man is definitely 'out'). The man is doing what the disciples think is *their* prerogative.
- Are there issues about inclusion/exclusion in Mark's community?
- Jesus sternly corrects them – 'You must not stop him'. If the man is doing good in the name of Jesus he is showing himself a true disciple (*doing the Good News*), and unlikely, therefore, to speak ill of Jesus. Jesus shows a very tolerant attitude towards the man and recognises the good he is doing (which the disciples don't).
- Jesus goes further: 'Anyone who is not against us is for us'. This is an amazingly generous and trusting statement on the part of Jesus. It is rather suggesting that the possibility of discipleship belongs to everyone (not just to 'the chosen'). The challenge, then, is to see the presence of God and the action of God's spirit in those not 'officially' appointed or even recognised as disciples.
- Jesus underlines this point with the statement about the person – presumably *not* a disciple – who gives a cup of water to a disciple. It's a bit mysterious, but I think it means that those who do acts of kindness are recognised by God (that's the meaning of 'not lose his reward') so what right has the disciple to jealously guard

God's kindness as though it were his/hers to dispense, and to decide to whom it will be dispensed?

- The warning about the consequences of causing those who have faith to 'stumble' – 'obstacle' is not such a good translation. A strong warning to the disciples that in their judgement against the man they may be, in fact, destroying faith by impeding the action of God – God is the sovereign here, not the disciple.
- The following verses are not an invitation to self-harm. The use of the 'body' may be a metaphor for Mark's community or for the community of disciples – a very common theme in literature of the day where communities/societies were often described in terms of a body, and members as parts of the body (eg. hand, eye, foot). The passage may be about getting rid of members who cause others to 'stumble' (sin is not the correct translation).
- It can also be read as Jesus directing the disciple's attention away from judging the outsider and towards looking at themselves and their own behaviour. It's a warning that they may be risking their place in the kingdom.
- Notice the contrast which runs through the passage between the 'outsider' (the man) and the 'insiders' (the disciples). As Mark tells the story, it is the outsider who, according to Jesus, is really an 'insider' (a 'true' disciple) whereas the insider-disciples may very well find themselves on the outside.

### The Liturgical Context

The foundation for the Gospel story is well laid in the first reading from the book of Numbers. In response to Moses' complaint about being overloaded, God decides to take a little of the spirit he has given to Moses and to give it to 70 elders who will be assistants to Moses. Two of the 70 are not in the Tent of Meeting on the appointed day, but they, too, received a share of the spirit given to Moses. Joshua (Moses' principal assistant) complains about the two men to Moses. Moses (like Jesus in the Gospel) shows a very tolerant stance towards the two men and challenges Joshua to search his own heart as to the real reason he wants the men stopped.

### Reflection

The disciples are on a steep learning curve as Jesus instructs them about what true discipleship is all about.

Last week, using a little child, Jesus tried to show them that real leadership is about putting aside our own needs for social status, self-importance, power and wealth and to give ourselves fully to the service of others.

But the disciples are slow learners. In this Sunday's Gospel, when they report that they tried to stop someone casting out devils in Jesus' name just because 'he was not one of us', they probably expected praise from Jesus. Instead, they got a rebuke.

True discipleship is not about holding the mystery of the Kingdom to our self, to dispense as we see fit, deciding who merits our love, concern and service, and who does not.

Both principal readings this weekend remind us that the mystery belongs to God who chooses and uses whomever God wills in the service of human beings and the kingdom. The true disciple needs to have the humility to see that he or she is simply one among many whom God has chosen. In the leadership of service there is no place for those who exult themselves or believe themselves to be holders of some privileged position with the power to control the mystery. And jealousy of others distorts God's intentions and compromises our efforts.

In the second part of the Gospel Jesus redirects the disciples' attention to the evil that may be found inside the Christian community. Bad example or exploitative behaviour can be a stumbling block to more vulnerable members of the community.

Such people stand in contrast to the 'man who is not one of us' but who is doing a good thing by using the name of Jesus to heal people – he is a 'true' but unknown disciple of Jesus. Those who claim to be true disciples may very well find themselves to be outsiders and excluded from the kingdom.

The graphic sayings are really an invitation for all would-be disciples to search their own hearts and to do the work of pruning away those things which stand in the way of being a true disciple.

Jesus shifts the emphasis from the good deeds of the outsider at the beginning of the reading, to the sinful actions of members of the community towards the end of the reading. Perhaps he is inviting the disciples and us to look at our own motivations and actions rather than to judge other people.