

THE PLACE OF BELIEF AND UNBELIEF IN MARK'S GOSPEL

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When the author of Mark's Gospel put quill to papyrus, sometime around AD65 or possibly a little later, he would have been very aware of the dark clouds of war gathering over Judea and Jerusalem. In the space of four or five years the Jewish revolt would have been crushed, and Jerusalem and its Temple would be left a smoking ruin. Many of the eye witnesses to the ministry of Jesus would be scattered or dead, and Mark was concerned to provide the members of his small Christian community (probably in Rome) with what he believed to be a factual account of the ministry and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth while eye witnesses were still alive, and could give testimony. Already there were some scattered writings of varying worth being produced, based on the oral traditions that had grown up, and it was important to write something that was based on oral traditions that, as far as possible, were securely linked to eye witness testimony. The importance of eye witness accounts providing the basis of the Gospels is only just being given scholarly recognition in the ivory towers of academia, but while memories are intact, it is much harder to embroider stories or invent new ones. Mark's Gospel was written at a time when there would have been many who had personal memories and experiences of Jesus of Nazareth, or who knew people who had. I am convinced that this is one of the reasons why there is so little evidence of elaboration or invention in Mark, when compared with Luke for example, who wrote another twenty or more years after Mark.

Mark was concerned to write a document that would inform, educate, and give a reliable foundation for the faith of his fellow Christians. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the reality of an underlying historical tradition, does not preclude adjustments to the story to give weight and force to the writer's aims. Mark may have been writing history, but he was also writing theology, he was writing to instruct and edify, and his writing reflects his theological concerns. The emphases, in particular, that I wish to think about this afternoon relate to the question of discipleship. One of the key statements of Jesus in the Gospel is the harsh reminder that to be a disciple of Jesus requires a person to take up his cross and follow him (Mark 10:21). This is something that we forget when the church becomes respectable, but something that Christians in the Middle East, for example, are being confronted with ever more frequently. They face the daily reality of taking up a cross and marching to the gallows or its equivalent. They know all too well that to follow Jesus means suffering with him, and dying with him. Mark's Gospel is thus very likely designed to counter the triumphalist teachings of those who want to live on a perpetual high, as some still do. Mark's telling of the good news thus emphasises the fact that, although the whole ministry of Jesus was designed to encourage response leading to allegiance, in reality that response was frequently one of rejection; people do not want to draw the link between the sufferings of Jesus and its implications for their own lives – they did not then, and they do not now! But the way of Jesus is the way of the cross. The suffering servant calls his followers to share his suffering.

Not surprisingly, we are much more at home with the positive aspects of the way that people responded to the words of Jesus. We expect Jesus to send people on their way with a statement such as, "Go in peace, your faith has saved you" (Mark 5:34). A positive statement such as this emphasises the importance of belief, and it would be much more in keeping with what we would associate with the proclamation of the Good News. After all, Mark states at the beginning of his Gospel that the message concerned the Good News of God. It was a message that was centred on Jesus of Nazareth, who the new Christian community recognised

as the Messiah in whom God's rule had come, and good news is something that is to be received joyfully – or at least one would expect this to be the case. But Mark was concerned to tell the story as it was, and it soon becomes very apparent that not everyone saw Jesus in this light; in fact it was much more likely to have been the minority who responded positively, in spite of his comments about the crowds responding with wonder and excitement. Their fickleness would be apparent all too soon.

Much more in evidence is the strong negative element running through Mark, and it is this negative, unbelieving response to Jesus, and what he said and did, that is an important part of what I wish to consider with you this afternoon. We naturally tend to emphasise the positive responses in the Gospel story, but if we are to see and understand the whole picture, then we also need to consider the place of unbelief in Mark's unfolding story, for faith and unbelief coexist, not merely in Mark's Gospel, but in our own world. We have to come to terms with this in our own presentation of the Good News.

The response of belief

It is generally recognised by modern scholars that Mark's Gospel is a much more sophisticated composition, in both literary and theological terms, than was once thought. Mark was not just a story teller, nor even an historian; he was also a theologian, in particular a theologian of the cross. Indeed, it has been said that Mark wrote theology dressed up as narrative! Mark had little time for triumphalism, in fact one of the essential elements of Mark's Gospel is the portrayal of Jesus as a total failure in the eyes of many of the other characters in the story, especially those to whom the majority of the people would show respect, such as Pharisees and Sadducees, of whom more anon. Those who saw and heard Jesus should have recognised him for who he was. There were those who did recognise him; those who came for the cure of their illnesses, such as Jairus on behalf of his daughter, or blind Bartimaeus, or the friends of the paralysed man who carried him to Jesus, or the woman with chronic bleeding, and then, of course, there was the Roman centurion at the cross who brings the story full circle by bringing us back to Mark's opening statement that the Gospel is about the son of God. These were all people who saw and believed, even though they may have not grasped the whole story. They believed, not because of indisputable proof, but because the penny dropped, the ice cracked, and the light shone; it was a situation of disclosure. The deep underlying problem, even for the disciples, was simply, as Jesus put it, that they had eyes, but did not see, and ears, but did not hear (Mark 8:18) In spite of having heard his call, and having followed him, they remained in a sort of spiritual fog with muddled ideas. I suggest that Mark's picture of the disciples might well be his picture of many Christian people today

Nonetheless, in spite of only partial understanding, and confused ideas about his purposes, the disciples were people who had responded to the call of Jesus. His call went far beyond what the rabbis would have expected from their disciples. The call of Jesus was a summons to turn one's back on an existing way of life, and to become attached to Jesus in a totally new response of obedience and service. As Matthew has Jesus remark, “many are called, but few are chosen!”(Matt 20:16). Those who did respond to Jesus were very much in a minority. When the chips were down, the vast majority of the erstwhile followers of Jesus simply evaporated like the morning dew.

The response of unbelief

The importance of unbelief in the Gospel story, however, is given greater prominence by Mark, and it something often overlooked in our thinking. Wherever Jesus went he stirred up

opposition, and even enmity. Stories of conflict and controversy abound, especially with respect to his relationships with the poor and marginalised of society, with his attitude to the keystones of Jewish religion in Torah and Temple, and with the two dominant religious and socio-political groupings among the Jews of his time, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees formed the aristocratic-government caste, close to the power base of Herod, and guardians of the Temple. They were very largely from the priestly families of Jerusalem. They were rich, influential, and were concerned in maintaining the status quo. The last thing they wanted to do was to rock the boat and upset the Romans; they had too much to lose. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was a loose cannon. He needed to be put in his place, and if that should turn out to be a Roman gibbet, then that was fine by them. The common people saw them as haughty and presumptuous, and they certainly had a taste for public show, ostentatious display, and sumptuous houses, as excavations in Israel have made clear. The recently discovered ossuary that had housed the bones of Joseph, the son of Caiaphas who you will remember had sat in judgment on Jesus at the behest of Pilate (John 18:13, 14, 24, 28), was an exquisite example of elegance and ornamental design. One would need to look no further in order to dramatise the huge gap between Jesus, the champion of the poor, and the wealth and vanity of the Jerusalem priesthood.

On the other hand stood those known as Pharisees, a group that has suffered from a bad press, particularly in the New Testament, which has coloured our conception of this group. True, they tended to parade their piety (a characteristic of religious people not unknown in our own time) and make a great show of their puritanical plainness, but they were very largely separate from the swaggering Sadducees, who were to all intents and purposes their enemies. This is one reason why it is so difficult to accept the story of the alliance between them and the Herodian party to bring down Jesus (Mark 3:6). The Pharisees believed that God was the ruler of Israel, and the Torah was the ultimate authority. They set themselves up as the guardians of holiness, the teachers and guides who would instruct in the way of the law of God. Their problem was their unbending, almost puritanical legalism.

Jesus cut through the attitudes of both groups, although most of his strictures seem to have been directed against the Pharisees. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," Jesus tells his disciples, following the stories of the feeding of the crowds (Mark 8:15). Mark has set this saying in a context that would suggest he means "leaven" to indicate that rigid attitude that affects the whole personality, making people self-righteous, uncomprehending, and hard hearted, unable to see the truth even when it is set clearly before them because of their preconceptions and prejudices. The leaders of the Jewish people were blind to his person, and totally unable to come to terms with, and accept, his teaching which broke the straightjacket of conventional piety (Mark 2:21,22). Mark, in fact, states that the religious establishment wanted to get rid of him because they were afraid of his teaching (Mark 11:18).

Lack of comprehension, however, was not restricted to Pharisees, it was the perpetual problem of the disciples themselves. They consistently failed to understand with the facts plainly set before them. There are times when it is clear that Jesus is thoroughly irritated at their failure, and he accuses them of having eyes, but failing to see, and ears, but failing to hear (Mark 8:18). In another stinging rebuke, on a par with his castigation of the Pharisees, he says, "O faithless generation, how long must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). Unbelief is the motif that runs through the Gospel, eventually culminating in the rejection of Jesus by his own disciples, firstly with the betrayal of Judas, and then by mass desertion at his trial and execution. This lack of belief persists into the resurrection story. The women who had gone to the tomb do not rush back excitedly to the rest of the disciples. Instead they fled from the

tomb, saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid (Mark 16:8). There is no belief here! What a contrast to the story of the resurrection as it is told by the other evangelists! Surely, Mark could not have ended his story on such a negative note! So well-meaning people in the early church added their own endings, with suitable exaggeration, to make Mark fit their preconceptions. But this is exactly where Mark wanted to end. He provides us with a second hand message given to a few scared women who were too afraid to pass it on. We are left in the air – there is no cast iron evidence of the resurrection, there is simply a command to go, and it is only as people are willing to obey the command that they finally see and believe.

It is not only the disciples who should have understood and did not, it was also the family of Jesus and the people among whom he had grown up. They thought he was unhinged, and they wanted to take him home out of harm's way (Mark 3:21). When he returned to his home town and family roots, all he received were sarcastic comments. “Who does he think he is?” is the response to his teaching, he is just the local builder, “Mary's son,” a statement almost certainly designed to be an insult, for Jewish men were not identified by their mothers, but by their fathers (Mark 6:1-5). Is there a hint here of something irregular about the birth of Jesus that would make his claims nonsense in the eyes of sensible people? As John was to write some thirty years later, “his own people did not receive him.” They were scandalised by him, and their hearts were hardened to one of their own who claimed to be more than they were. Perhaps the saddest comment is the response of Jesus himself, “he marvelled because their unbelief” (Mark 6:6).

In conclusion

What I have attempted to do this afternoon is to draw attention to the emphasis Mark places on the response of *unbelief* to the person and teaching of Jesus among the various characters inhabiting this Gospel. His teaching is consistently marked by misapprehension and misunderstanding, his disciples follow him, but most of the time seem not to have a clue about what is going on. Crowds follow him, but seem to have no motivation except to enjoy the excitement like the crowds at a football match, he teaches with authority, but no one understands. At the end, his followers desert him, and the resurrection story is clouded with doubt and fear. On one level, the Jesus who Mark presents to us is a complete failure. The negative elements of Mark's Gospel remind us that the call to follow this Jesus is a call that defies all normal patterns of leadership. It is a call that seems to demand too much, for to take up one's cross is a bridge too far, as so many characters in the Gospel discover. This Jesus requires repentance and faith from us without any supporting evidence. Faith in Jesus is just that – faith! So Mark's challenge to his own time, and to us in our time is simple; the only way to find Jesus, is to follow him, whatever the cost.