Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel

Any account of an event is told to a particular audience for a particular reason. This is true of a newspaper report, a modern biography or an account of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the four canonical gospels was written for a particular audience in a particular place under particular circumstances for a particular reason or set of reasons, and those factors influence and colour the way the story is told; the way each evangelist uses the oral tradition and other sources to tell the story of Jesus in a way that serves the needs of their particular community at that time.

Although there is some dispute, Mark’s gospel appears to have been written in the first instance for the fledgling Christian community in Rome under Nero’s persecution. This was a community living in fear of persecution, and facing questions about what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Christ when one is living with the very real possibility of that costing one’s life.

Mark has constructed his gospel to address these questions of discipleship, not by giving simple answers but by raising the most difficult questions in the light and context of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection so that his audience can reflect on the decisions they must make in that light and context. This is a gospel that raises more questions than it answers, that leaves much unsaid for the reader to fill in, that invites a response rather than giving commands.

Mark opens his gospel with an announcement about who Jesus is, and yet throughout his gospel he repeatedly shows the disciples misunderstanding Jesus’ words, actions and nature. Clearly from the beginning Mark intends his audience to be watching the mistakes and successes of the various characters from a position of knowledge, able to learn from both because they can see them for what they are. Mark’s opening line (or

1 Wilfred Harrington, “Mark as Story.” Priests & People 8 (June 1994): 243

title) is curious: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1) and invites the reader to see the whole of Mark’s work as the beginning of a story to be carried on by the reader⁴. And yet the next line makes clear that this is a story that also began long ago before even the prophets Isaiah and Malachi.

Mark makes much use of the word immediately in his breathless gospel, and launches straight into his account of Jesus own commissioning (1:9-11), linking it immediately to temptation and testing (1:12-13). As a gospel written for a persecuted community Mark makes it clear from the outset that trials and difficulties are an integral part of being involved in Jesus’ story.

Mark’s account of the disciples’ call (1:16-20 and 2:13-14) is brief and gives no hint of their reasons for choosing to respond to Jesus’ invitation. Perhaps Mark recognizes the diversity of reasons that his audience have for their responses and does not wish to elevate any particular ones over any others by associating them directly with Jesus or his immediate disciples. What Mark’s account does make clear is that this call will involve giving up or leaving behind possessions, lifestyles, even family. The separate account of Levi’s calling (2:13-17) speaks of the diversity of people Jesus called. As a tax-collector Levi would have been a reviled figure, and Mark reminds his community that God’s call comes to all sorts of people, even those hated, despised or feared, and that welcoming them into the community is necessary if difficult. This is quickly followed by a question about fasting which may indicate that this was a controversial subject in Mark’s community, but also raises questions about what sort of Kingdom Jesus is introducing and how is it different to what has gone before (2:18-22)

Chapter 4 contains a series of parables designed to teach about the Kingdom of God. The parable of the sower would speak loudly to a community where persecution is causing many who were initially enthusiastic to fall away through fear and others are having their faith choked out by worry and disaster. This story would act to both explain that falling away and encouraging those who are persevering. The parable of the Lamp, by contrast,

³ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, (London: SPCK,2001), 224
would represent a major challenge – to go out and be the visible light of the world in face of such fear would not have been easy. The parable of the Mustard Seed speaks strongly to any small, relatively new, community of God that he is working through their weakness to achieve great things. The chapter ends with the enacted parable of Mark’s Jesus calming the storm – a comforting parable to a community wrapped up in the storm of Nero’s Rome. The words Mark has on Jesus’ lips – “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” - will have spoken straight to them, demanding that they do better than the disciples’ failure. The disciples’ words as they wake Jesus, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing”, are words of fear, not faith, and contrast strongly with the many minor characters that come to Jesus trusting that he will be able to address their problems.

Where Jairus asks “Come and lay your hands on [my daughter], so that she may be made well and live”, all the disciples can say in their predication is “we are going to die”.

Jesus’ sending out of the apostles in chapter 6 is preceded by the short account of his rejection in Nazareth. Mark needs to make clear to his audience that they can expect rejection, that not everyone will respond to the good news that they bring, even among their own friends and family, but that they need to go out into the world in general unworried by how ill-equipped they feel they are. They are sent out to oppose what is wrong with the world (“unclean spirits”), to announce God’s sovereign rule coming to bear by bring his healing to his people as the prophets foretold, and to call them to return to God’s path (repentance)\(^4\). As twelve disciples they represent God’s restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is one example in Mark of the disciples living up to Jesus’ expectation and reaping the benefits – successfully casting out demons and healing the sick. Throughout Mark’s gospel the disciples mostly fail to live up to their calling. Unlike the authorities and demons they are not trying to oppose Jesus but to follow him, but repeatedly they misunderstand his mission, fall short of his calling, and yet keep trying. In the end they do follow him into the danger of Jerusalem, but abandon him to his fate. They are prepared to pay a cost to be his disciples, but not the cost of their lives. And each time Mark asks the question “who is Jesus” their responses fall short. Through their

\(^4\) Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 70.
failure Mark shows his community what is expected in a way that sets high demands, expectations and costs but also shows Jesus as remaining faithful to his followers even when they fail providing they persevere. In order to show what the proper responses in contrast to the disciples erroneous ones Mark uses his minor characters. These minor characters invariably show trust in who Jesus is and what he can achieve, and respond appropriately to his words, actions and healings “glorifying God” and “spreading the news”. The women following Jesus in particular symbolise simple faithfulness to his calling. When the male discipleship abandons Jesus at his arrest, the women continue to look on unashamed.

Balanced against these minor characters are the forces that oppose Jesus: the authorities of synagogue and Temple and the demonic forces of oppression. Both of these stand in the way of the Kingdom vision Jesus represents, the authorities because they are unable or unwilling to recognise it as God’s saving rule, the demonic forces because they do not recognise it.

Jesus disciples vacillate between these two positions, sometimes supporting and enacting Jesus mission, sometimes opposing it because they are afraid or fail to understand it. Mark’s audience is invited to make the same choices but to do better than the disciples – emulating Jesus and the minor characters and rejecting the way of the authorities and powers.

The issue of how different people see Jesus is explored most fully in chapter 8. Here the authorities, represented by the Pharisees, demand a “sign from heaven” (8:11) even though Jesus actions have been filled with significance and Jesus takes this up with the disciples drawing their attention back to the previous story of the feeding of four thousand. The story of the blind man at Bethsaida proves an enacted parable of the situation – when Jesus heals him initially he can see partially - men as though they are trees walking. The disciples are able to see what is going on but only in a distorted form;

5 Harrington, *Mark as Story*, 246

6 Harrington, *Mark as Story*, 247
only after Jesus’ death and resurrection will they be able to see fully. The authorities will never see because they do not want to – their requests for signs, for seeing, are not genuine. They are not interested in seeing the Kingdom of God unless it happens on their terms.

A second set of texts intensely focused on discipleship occurs in chapter 10. The story of the rich young man overturns preconceptions about wealth being a sign of God’s favour and reinforces the theme of the cost of discipleship. The story of James and John’s request overturns assumptions about how power and position work in the Kingdom of God. Those who follow Jesus can expect neither worldly wealth nor power and prestige. Both of these were no-doubt in short supply in Mark’s fledgling and oppressed Christian community.

The pattern of Mark’s gospel is one of a difficult journey. The gospel opens with two prophetic references to preparing the “Way of the Lord” and travelling is a constant theme of the ministry of Jesus and his followers, walking around Galilee and surrounding areas for the first half of the book. Only when the disciples begin to realise who Jesus is (something Mark prepared his readers for in his opening title) does the Journey become focused towards Jerusalem, major confrontation with the authorities, and death. Jesus’ followers are somewhat reluctant followers along this journey, wanting to follow the easier path rather than understanding the more difficult path that Jesus is embarked upon.7 Mark wants his audience to understand the Christian journey as having a pattern of call, confrontation and rejection rather than the disciples’ vision of victory on the world’s terms.

Mark’s gospel ends abruptly. Most authorities regard 16:8 as the closing verse of the chapter, although some argue that the original ending has been lost.8 Whether verse 8 is the original ending or not it leaves the story open with the women, the most faithful of Jesus’ followers, commissioned to spread the news of his resurrection to the disciples and

8 Wright, Mark for Everyone, 222
to take the message “to Galilee”, instead hiding in fear. Written for a community engulfed in its own fears this would have represented a major challenge: are you also going to hide in fear, or are you going to take the news into your Galilee?

Although our situation is not the same as that of Mark’s original audience, Mark’s lessons in discipleship still speak loudly and clearly. Fear of persecution and death are not a reality for most Christians, at least in the West, but the cost of discipleship remains high and the reminder that worldly prosperity is not a sign of God’s favour should ring alarm bells for all Christians living in the affluent parts of the world. We need to be alert to miracles – wondrous signs of God’s reign overcoming the darkness and suffering of the world, and be open to God’s call to put our lives and resources to work making those signs a reality in our world. Do our actions tell the world of Jesus’ resurrection or do we hide because we are afraid of the cost? Do we, like the Temple authorities make use of what God has provided for our own benefit, like Peter make big claims for ourselves but avoid the real issues when they crop up (14:68) or like the widow (12:42-44) quietly give our whole lives to God and trust him to make use of it?
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