

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Fifteen – Mark 9:30-50

Mark 9:30-31 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31 because he was teaching his disciples.

We have left the region of Caesarea Philippi and Mount Hermon – if indeed that is where the Transfiguration took place – and are now heading back south and into Galilee. This strengthens the location of Mount Hermon, because if Jesus and the disciples were already located in Galilee, it would be difficult to understand why Mark says “they left that place.”

They were not entirely incognito in the Caesarea Philippi area, thanks to the work of the disciples. But now, leaving the area, Jesus needs privacy with them, in order to pass on his urgent teaching, without the pressure of the crowds. In this statement, Mark explains why Jesus tells those healed to “not tell anyone.”

Jesus could not do all he needed to do when the needs of the crowds, to which he felt obligated to respond, took him away from his teaching. “Success hinges on training these few, who will carry the gospel to the world, not on the ovations from dumbfounded crowds.”

Mark 9:31b He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” 32 But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

Mark now explains just what it is Jesus was trying to explain: his arrest, death and resurrection. For we who have heard the story countless times, we wonder why the disciples could not understand. It is instructive that today, 2000 years later, this vision of a Suffering, Dying and Rising Messiah is still rejected by Jesus’ own Jewish people.

Mark tells us the disciples “were afraid to ask him about it.” They had already experienced Jesus’ rebuke of Peter. They were still stinging from other rebukes, such as the series of frustrated exclamations after the feeding of the 4000, as well as the more recent “How long shall I put up with you?” Small wonder they were reluctant to ask for greater clarity.

The only thing that could – and would – convince the disciples of the truth of Jesus’ words regarding his eventual fate – arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection – were the events themselves. Still, as the other Gospels remind us, even after the fact, it required significant explanation in order to make sense!

Mark 9:33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” 34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

The disciples are afraid to upset Jesus, and ask him more about this arrest and death. Jesus’ frustration with his closest followers is now reaching a crisis point. Instead of asking Jesus how and why this arrest will come about, instead, once again, they are bickering amongst themselves as to who among them is most important.

Arriving back home in Capernaum, Jesus confronts them with the question – what were you arguing about on the road? Mark admits that none of them had the courage to admit the truth – they were arguing about which of them is the greatest. Not, “How can we help Jesus?” Again, they are consumed with the very human question, “What’s in it for me?”

It isn’t their first argument. They had argued among themselves over who forgot the loaves (8:16). They had argued with the teachers of the law when they failed to exorcise an unclean spirit (9:14). They will shortly argue with successful exorcists who do not follow them (9:38). They will sneer at a woman who displays extravagant devotion to Jesus and denounce it as a waste (14:4-5). This competitive spirit even taints their last supper with Jesus as Peter boasts that he will outdo all the other disciples in remaining faithful to Jesus (14:29).

Picture it: Jesus finally manages time alone with this disciples to share with them the deepest teaching on his heart – his impending arrest, trial and crucifixion - and instead, Mark pictures him walking alone, as the disciples argue amongst themselves. Sadly, in our own lives, and as a church, we often do little better.

These portraits painted by Mark are not “airbrushed” in any way, to remove embarrassing blemishes and imperfections. Mark (and Peter through his recounting of the stories) is committed to presenting an accurate portrayal, even if it puts the “inner circle” in a bad light. Mark knew that it would give hope to us all in the midst of our own failings.

Mark 9:35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

Walking and talking didn't work. Jesus now formalises his teaching, and Mark indicates this when he writes, “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said...” When my parents had something important to say, they would call me from whatever I was doing, and tell me to sit down and listen. Jesus calls the Twelve aside, and says, in effect, “Pay attention.”

There has been constant bickering about who is most important, which misses the point of self-sacrifice which had, and would continue to, define Jesus' life, ministry, and death. ***“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*** This isn't about power – this is about giving up power, status and prestige for the sake of another.

Jesus said it clearly in Chapter 8:34-37, but the lesson has not sunk in: ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”***

“The disciples still have visions of grandeur and do not fantasize about becoming servants, who are at everybody's beck and call. They suffer from puffed-up ambition that will never be ready to take up a cross and follow a suffering servant Messiah.” And so Jesus illustrates what it means to be utterly without status or power. It is to be like a child.

Mark 9:36 He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

This is about status, not simplicity or gullibility. That's a different passage. Here, “Jesus does not set up the child as a model to be imitated, for his culture had no romanticized notions about children. They were not regarded as especially obedient, trusting, simple, innocent, pure, unself-conscious, or humble. The point of comparison is the insignificance of the child on the honour scale.”

“The child had no power, no status, and few rights. A child was dependent, vulnerable, entirely subject to the authority of the father; yet Jesus chooses such a one to represent those who are needy and lowly. If one wants to be great, one should shower attention on those who are regarded as insignificant, as Jesus himself has done. Jesus requires his great disciples to show humble service for the humble.”

“The rabbis classified children with the deaf, the dumb, the weak-minded, and slaves. Nowhere else in this period do we find children appealed to as examples to be imitated. To become as a child basically means to recognize one’s insignificance. What evokes repentance is the realization that one is as small and slight as a child before God.”

Mark 9:38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

This is a startling passage. It introduces the idea that not only Jesus was engaged in acts of exorcism, but others were as well. They are doing so “in Jesus’ name,” invoking Jesus’ authority, but they are not part of the inner circle. How could this be? We are used to thinking about the impact of Christianity as centering around only those stories contained in the New Testament, but there was apparently much more going on.

The irony here is that the disciples had recently failed in their own attempts to deal with an evil spirit – the boy with the “help my unbelief” father – and yet here, they have the unmitigated gall to tell someone else to stop, “because he was not one of us.” We’re right back to the “who is the greatest” problem – only “we” can do anything worthwhile! Is this a warning of the denominationalism and inter-church rivalry to come?

Mark 9:39 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Jesus’ explanation for condoning the exorcist’s success is practical, not theological. He argues that they cannot use his name to do mighty works and speak ill of him later. Anyone who recognizes the power of Jesus’ name will not accuse him of working by Beelzebub, as the teachers of the law from Jerusalem had done.

This is still echoing the teaching about humility. Anyone doing acts of compassion and kindness – even the offer of a cup of water “in my name”- is to be commended. There is too much work to be done, too great a task, to not include all those who seek to help. “Cups of water will be hard to come by, and then the disciples will appreciate more the neutrality of those who do not join the persecution but extend only the most basic kindness.”

Mark 9:42 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

A favourite method of Mafia execution was “cement overshoes”, resulting in the victim “sleeping with the fishes.” This is exactly what Jesus is describing here, as a preferable punishment than to be accused of causing believers to abandon their faith. Tying it in with the discussion at hand, God shows more concern for fragile faith than for fragile egos, which cause them to lord it over or ignore others.

Mark 9:43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.’

This is worrisome stuff. The ancient teacher Origen, active in the 200s, claims to have taken this passage literally, and, struggling with sexual sin, castrated himself. Much later in life, he told his students that he has since come to understand the passage allegorically! It would then mean, “Take care what you do, the situations in which you choose to put yourself, and what you covet.” In other words, “Action, direction, intent.” Or, “what you do, where you go, what you watch.”

Did you notice the missing verses? What happened to verse 44 and 46? Some ancient manuscripts included verse 48 as a repeated refrain. As an actual image of hell, it must be remembered that this image is repeated in a context where hyperbole – exaggeration – is being employed to make a point – cutting off hands and feet, gouging out eyes. The point is, of course the seriousness of sin and its consequence.

The quotation re the worms and fire is battlefield imagery from Isaiah 66:24, with the bodies of the defeated dead littering the fields, neglected, unburied, some consumed by worms, other bodies burned in grisly funeral pyres – unhappily, not an uncommon sight in ancient days, and in post-battle days in our own warring age. The battle against sin is serious.

Isaiah 66:24 “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

Mark 9:49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Mark gathers a couple of “salt” saying of Jesus together here, following on the imagery of the battlefield fire. The first, “salted with fire,” is a reference to purification, as in Leviticus 2:13 – ***“You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”***

Surprisingly, this single verse, not found in any other Gospel, was to become the basis of the concept of “purgatory” – a spiritual fire, post-death, to cleanse people from sin, and prepare them for heaven. There developed the idea that time in purgatory could be shortened by the good deeds, or offerings, of others on behalf of the dead. A central point of Protestant theology was the rejection of the idea of Purgatory.

Johann Tetzel, a traveling salesman in “indulgences,” which were believed to release the living or dead from the penalty of sin or the requisite time in purgatory (and raise important funds!), so enraged the young monk and Scholar Martin Luther, that he composed his famous 95 Theses to combat this heresy. It sparked the Reformation!

The “salt is good” saying refers to something maintaining its defining characteristic – in terms of salt, saltiness; in terms of discipleship, and in context with this whole passage, it is the characteristic of servanthood, which the disciples are rejecting in favour of “who is the greatest.” And so, “Have salt amongst yourselves” – act among one another in accordance with your discipleship characteristic, or servanthood; after all the arguing amongst the disciples identified above, sharing a servant attitude will lead to peace amongst the disciples, and the wider church as well. No arguing!