

MARK

The rest of Chapter One

Last time we looked long and hard at the accounts of the Baptism of Jesus, finding that Mark's account left a great deal of questions for the other evangelists to answer. Their correction of his account progressively diminished the rôle of the Baptist and back-pedalled on the actual baptism, until John gives us an encounter with a John the Baptist who simply bears witness to Jesus without baptising him at all.

In the rest of the first chapter we are plunged more or less headlong into the ministry of Jesus. The call of the disciples is handled very bluntly, and Jesus' first miracle is also his first contentious encounter with the demons - *who know who he is*. But Jesus' first command to the spirit is to be silent, and the people are left with a simple sense of wonder as he expels the spirit from the possessed man. It is notable that this first miracle is worked *on the Sabbath*, but that this fact goes unremarked. The cure of Simon's mother-in-law and of the multitude that assembles with the ending of the Sabbath complete the first day. The second day continues equally breathlessly with the cure of a leper - we have seen how cleverly Mark introduces the Isaianic theme of vicarious suffering, by reconciling the leper to the community, and condemning Jesus to a leper-like isolation in desert places. Note here that we are told that Jesus was feeling sorry for the leper. Insights into the Lord's inner experience are increasingly rare as the Gospel tradition develops: by the time John comes to write we are being told almost nothing about what Jesus felt, and very little about what he was thinking. We are given only his speech, and we are left to work out what lies behind it. Mark, by contrast, often does say what is going on in Jesus' mind, and this is sometimes referred to as the mode of "the omniscient narrator"; a story-teller is often seen as able to tell us everything, and Mark likes to colour every part of his canvas.

Chapter Two

For no particular reason we start a new chapter here, with the story of the paralytic lowered through the roof. This includes the famous statement "Your sins are forgiven." This *does* get noticed by some murmuring scribes, and Jesus, informed - presumably supernaturally - of their thoughts, tackles them; this adds to the eventual healing a first claim to divine mandate, because the miracle is meant "to prove that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins". The people's response is once more unbiassed by the prejudices that will come later: "they were all astonished and praised God saying: We have never seen anything like this".

Contention with human opponents now takes the centre stage. Jesus calls a *tax-collector* (Levi) and attends a dinner in his house along with other "tax-collectors and sinners". This sharing with the sinners at their table is scandalous (Ps 26:4-5) and provokes the wrath of "the scribes of the Pharisee party" (who, incidentally, are unidentifiable in history). This is called a *pronouncement-story*, because the purpose of its being saved is the saying of Jesus at the end: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners." Immediately we can see a pattern emerging in the ministry of Jesus, which cambers him towards the weak and the sinful, and therefore aligns him against the puritans and the perfected. We can see another pronouncement-story in the discussion about fasting which follows. The disciples of

John, who was distinctly ascetic, ask why Jesus is not an apostle of fasting. Jesus says two quite different things: firstly, that his disciples are at a wedding-feast; secondly, that old ways will not sort well with a new world. For the coming kingdom, there must be a total renewal. The two little parables - of the patch on the cloak, and the lively new wine squeezed into weakened old wine-skins - are meant *to prepare people for change*. We have to ask whether these two parables really belong here because Jesus uttered them in response to the question they answer, or whether the evangelist, working with scissors and paste, has discerned a relevance in them and added them to the wedding-party answer which was saved as Jesus' first response to the debate about fasting. We are not told what the Baptist's disciples replied. It is suggested that a wedding-feast implies good clothes and plenty of wine, so that these themes might naturally come to mind in the context. What is stressed is the centrality of Jesus. He is regarded as responsible for the behaviour of his disciples, and it is because he is the bridegroom that they *cannot* fast, as long as he is with them. He is also revealed as knowing the future, when he speaks of the day when he is taken from them: the early church *did* fast, despite the fact that Jesus appears not to have done so (remember that, in Mark, Jesus is not even described as fasting in the desert). This foreknowledge will continue to feature in the rest of the Gospel. The two little parables also stress the irresistible power of the new order, *ripping, destroying, wasting* the clothes and the wine. I believe that, hidden in this stream of writing, we can find the whole theme of Christian sacrifice; for many people, following Christ involves the sacrifice of great possibilities - not just those that would be selfish or sinful - and the actual destruction of good things that might otherwise have been. The Church's decision to preserve priestly celibacy is surely largely in response to this truth. Just as the apostles come to Jesus before the Last Supper and say: *We have left everything to follow you. What are we to have, then?*" many Christians have accepted the loss of part of their lives to make room for the closest following of Christ. (The question of the disciples is completely appropriate, and is so treated by Jesus.)

The Sabbath controversy begins with the incident of corn picking on the Sabbath; Mark comments that the disciples are plucking the corn to *make a path - road making* would certainly count as breaking the Sabbath. Mt and Lk have them picking corn, grinding it in their hands, and eating it because they were hungry (*harvesting* and *milling* being both prohibited on the Sabbath). The verse about the Sabbath being made for man and not vice-versa is unique to Mark. The quotation of something David did when he and his followers were hungry shows that a great Israelite of the past was capable of overriding a holy ordinance. Jesus then claims that, as the Son of Man preaching the kingdom of heaven, he is greater than David, and is all the more empowered to define what is to be done on the Day of the Lord. *This is certainly a Christological claim on his part*, and this gives us the real reason for the preservation of the story: not that we should become involved in rabbinical dispute about the Sabbath, but that we should hear Jesus make the claim. In fact, the Sabbath in Jewish tradition is not the charmless thing we have seen it made, and the title "Lord of the Sabbath" is a most beautiful and joyous title for the Messiah.

Chapter Three

The second incident, illogically separated from the first by the beginning of chapter three, refers to the healing of a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. The opposition is evoked under the mysterious title "they", whose reference can only be to the synagogue as a whole. In 2:24 the Pharisees are said to have asked: "Why are they doing something on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?" Jesus is already operating in a hostile environment. Where there is danger of death, Sabbath laws were annulled for a healer or rescuer; but only *the saving of a*

whole life could justify healing on the Sabbath, and the issues are of importance; having been once warned, Jesus is courting a judicial sentence which could reach the death penalty (although technically the Romans had forbidden the execution of such sentences). So the question Jesus asks, “Is it permitted on the Sabbath...to save life, *or to kill?*” is more than academic, and includes the lethal intentions of the Pharisees against *him*. Jesus is said here to be *angry* and to be *grieved* - both emotions which John would not easily have predicated of him. His anger grows out of the murderous design against him; the grief comes from his awareness of their callousness. He does grieve deeply over his enemies, and he gets angry in order to relieve suffering - to do good, in other words. By contrast, the hearts of his enemies are callous enough to commit harm, even to kill, on the Sabbath. Note that, since the healing is accomplished by a *word*, rather than a deed, Jesus silences even those who would not have accepted his defence of Sabbath healing. Perhaps for this reason, the Pharisees, frustrated in their desire for a theological charge against Jesus, go out to plot *with the Herodians* (venal political placemen) to entrap him by less exalted means. Mt and Lk excise this unholy coalition, and just report how they discussed “with themselves” how to deal with him.

The next two sections of the Gospel establish *the personal magnetism of Jesus*: we are continuing the thought in 3:6, that the Pharisees and the Herodians are plotting to destroy him. His response is to withdraw to a safe distance. See the crowds that follow him: they give a popular answer to the plots. We are being shown a good man, not the dangerous, vile sort who is destined to hang on a Cross.

Note that the crowds do not follow him simply from Galilee, where he had so far been ministering. They also come from Judea and Jerusalem, in the South, and from even further in Idumaea: from Transjordan to the East, and from Tyre and Sidon in the North. (There is no land to the west, because of the Mediterranean sea). Mark has described no mission in these parts, but we are told that they came because they had *heard* of the things he was doing. It is not fanciful to see in these visitors the eventual harvest of the Gentiles which, by the time of this Gospel, was already the principal part of the early Church. The crowd is so great that it is threatening, and Jesus has a boat readied to protect him from being crushed.

The dangerous crowding effect is a *positive* attraction because it is based on the healing power that comes out of him to the sick and afflicted. There is another effect - that on the unclean spirits which, on his confronting them, are forced into confessing him as Son of God. This again - profession of faith by devils - is a sign of Jesus irresistible attraction (it is not said, for instance, that Jesus exorcised them, though perhaps Mark suggests that their confession of Jesus as Son of God is equivalent to their departure; but the story is not about exorcism).

His further withdrawal “up the mountain” indicates the start of a new section, which gives room for the choice of the Twelve; this is related directly to the large size of the multitude; he needs help! Being on high gives him a sense of sovereignty. Exercising this power, the Greek literally says: “he chooses those *he himself* wanted (and they went to him); and he made twelve that they might be with him, and that he might send them to proclaim, and to have authority to expel the demons; and he made the Twelve.” He renames Simon, which is another exercise of authority, and then names James and John and explains their new name too, even though it would have been more natural to name Andrew, Simon’s brother, with Peter; it seems he wants to tell us about the changing of names, precisely because this section is stressing the authority of Jesus over those he has chosen: names for Jewish people are much more than mere handles. The mention of the future betrayal alongside Judas indicates at the very beginning that the scandal of

the Cross occurs with Jesus' foreknowledge and agreement; we should take aboard that little outpost of intention on the part of the evangelist. Many people think that the whole aim of the Gospel is to understand the Cross as an act of God, in which Jesus co-operates, rather than an act of men.

The next section is once more signalled by a change of scene: he went home. We shall now find quite a sophisticated little pattern: a charge is about to be levelled against Jesus that "he has Beelzebub"; it will be sandwiched between the story of his family setting out to take possession of him because he is berserk, and their arrival and the reception they are accorded.

"Being at home" clearly cannot mean Nazareth here, because the family would not have had to set out to fetch him if it were. It therefore could refer to Capernaum, where Peter and Andrew's house is situated. Jesus appears to have set up a base there. The family think he is, in the old English phrase, "beside himself" - that is, standing outside his proper personality. We aren't given any convincing evidence for this opinion. But we can find a relation between this suspicion and what follows: the meat in this sandwich describes a more ominous threat to Jesus: the scribes "who came down from Jerusalem". Their presence is not unprepared-for, because we know that a great multitude has come from Jerusalem. That they have come "down" reminds us that Jesus is going to "go up" to Jerusalem, and there meet the hostility of the scribes and others, and be condemned. If now they have already arrived in Galilee and are forming the opinion that "He has Beelzebub" and "it is through the prince of devils that he casts devils out", then Jesus is being seriously arraigned. The charge is not simply that he is possessed: it is that *he has the prince of darkness at his disposal*; he "has" the whole demonic power, not as a victim, but as its governor. So we find Jesus here in a pincer-movement: on the one hand, his family are out "to take him in charge", on the other hand the religious authorities want to denounce his moral power. Against these two threats is set the power of Jesus himself, which we have been witnessing in the stories of the ministry so far. His approach is appropriate: using the same term as for the calling of the Twelve, "he called (the scribes) to him" (and they obey). First he points to the absurdity of Satan working against himself. The scribes should not see in the manifest *defeat* of Satan an evidence of Satan's *power*. Then he moves on the talk about a kingdom, and a royal house, divided against itself. Jesus is not arguing that Satan *is* so divided; yet his parable points forward to a new conclusion about what is happening in his exorcisms: a weakened dynasty, a kingdom at civil war, is an easy prey for the usurper and the invader; what is happening to Satan is that he is being invaded by an irresistible power, which is breaking down all resistance. Thus Jesus offers a contradiction to the charge: he confronts Satan as an antagonist, not as a partner. The "strong man fully armed" is hiding within a house which represents, not a possessed person (from whom Satan would be *expelled*) but the whole domain of Satan; Jesus enters this stronghold as a robber, and ties up Satan in his own place, and robs him of the possessions he has acquired (the people he has possessed). Once again we see Jesus presented as a figure of *power*, even against Satan.

The first charge, that Jesus "has Beelzebub" is now confronted. There is an amazing parallel to this passage in John's Gospel (7:20; 8:48; 8:52;10:20) where Jesus is accused of being possessed. His response is to warn them that if they persist in refusing the signs and insist on misinterpreting the clear evidence of God's presence, they will die in their sins". Here Jesus gives a solemn warning that to call him a demonic power will be to sin against the Holy Spirit, in a way that cannot be pardoned or reconciled. This gives awful import to the eventual crucifixion of Jesus *for blasphemy* - which amounts to this precise denunciation, and must incur the same penalty of unforgiveness.

At the end of the chapter the family arrives, and is standing outside - that is, they are not part of the circle of believers *inside* the house. They have come to exercise authority over him in the name of their natural relationship - as mother and brothers. But Jesus in the most astonishing way looks at those sitting *in a circle around him* - a circle which his natural family has failed to penetrate - and exclaims: "*Look! My Mother and my Brothers!*" -disregarding family ties in a way that almost contradicts the historical person that he is - a first-century Palestinian Jew. Once again we are presented with a Jesus whose personal power transcends the world into which he is born; he has appointed himself a new family which will do the will of God. We shall not hear about taking the Cross until ch. 8; but that is certainly what is in the wings.