

MARK 14

The Passion Narrative

We are entering the area of the Gospel where the oldest traditions lie. The whole Gospel tradition is based on the things people *said* in the beginning, to pass on the message about Jesus of Nazareth. In that collection of things that were said, there is nothing older than the description of the passion and death. We can be pretty sure that the words that gathered around this story - words like “handed over” and “sought for ways to destroy him” and “Crucify him” and “Come down from the Cross” - were attached to its telling from the earliest times. Having said that, we should not fail to notice that even here, in the most vital area for the telling of the story, there are basic differences between the four Gospels which relate to the different *theologies* of the evangelists. For example, do we know what Jesus’ last words were?

14:1-11

This forms the first unit of the chapter. It is *framed* between two accounts of the malevolence of the priests, and the story of the perfume lies between them. We are being told that Jesus’ predictions are coming true, in terms of the plot, and that he did not suffer the indignity of being buried without the anointing prescribed in the traditions of his people.

The determination not to seize Jesus in public, because of the certainty that the people would riot, underscores the theme we have seen throughout Mark, of Jesus’ hold over the people at large. So the thing will be accomplished “with cunning”, “by some trick”. Simon the leper is distinguished from Simon Peter, whose house Jesus visited at Capernaum, Simon of Cana or “the zealot” (3:18), Simon the brother of Jesus (6:3) whose house is in Nazareth, and Simon of Cyrene (yet to appear).

The perfume is very costly, and spikenard is known to us from the classical world as “the foremost possible rank of perfumes” (Pliny). The pouring-out, as opposed to smearing, of the fluid is a prodigal act; the breaking of the alabaster similarly refers to a total act of giving; not a drop is held back, and the vessel is henceforth unusable, the outpouring complete. Indignation breaks out: this is more than a year’s wages for a fully-employed manual labourer. Matthew allots this response to the disciples. Luke gives it to “the Pharisee”, later addressed as “Simon”, and John to Judas Iscariot. Mark is not interested in hanging the unworthy response on anyone, but in Jesus’ understanding of what is happening. The critics refer to what she has done as “waste” or even “destruction”. Jesus weighs in: “Why for *her* are you making trouble?” - which contrasts her rather pointedly with the plotting priests; there are others who might deserve trouble more. Then Jesus predicts his imminent Passion once more: *you will not always have me*. Literally, *what she had, she did*; a clever usage meaning *she gave* as well. Jesus is not implying, necessarily, that the woman *knows* the significance he is giving to her act. Rather he attaches the meaning to what she does because he knows the future. He has not predicted his Passion publicly in so many words, so only the disciples have heard his foretelling, and they neither accept nor understand it. Jesus therefore speaks veiledly of his *burial* (which only implies death). But his awareness that this anointing *takes the*

place of the customary post-mortem anointing emphasises the detailed nature of his foreknowledge. The quality of the perfume erases here, in advance, the indignity of his burial, which will lack even the cheap oil used for corpses.

Jesus further predicts that the world will discuss the deed of the woman wherever the Gospel is proclaimed; and we are fulfilling that prediction as well, at 2 Eton Grove, three years before the second millennium of the Gospel.

Judas “one of the Twelve” harks back to the call of the Twelve in chapter three. There he chose these men “to be with him”; Judas here is said to “go away” to the chief priests, thus breaking his compact with Jesus.

14:12-15

The predictive sequence continues with a remarkably detailed forecast of an apparently chance encounter (a man with a water-jar is rather unusual, in that drawing and bearing water was women’s work). Notice that the upper room will be “all prepared”; all the disciples have to do is to prepare the Passover meal itself. So there is something smacking almost of predestination about this passage; Mark is not above the suggestion of a supernatural *frisson*.

Timing the Passion account in Mark

In Mark the classical liturgical arrangement obtains: Jesus and the Twelve spend the previous Saturday resting in Jericho; then comes the triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Sunday, the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple on Monday, with the discourse on the Mount of Olives on Tuesday. We have been told at the head of the chapter that the perfume incident was “two days before the Passover”. Jesus is going to die on the Friday, which will be directly after the first day of Unleavened Bread (Thursday). The perfume incident is thus on Wednesday. This brings us the Last Supper as a Passover meal. It deserves to be said that, however theologically desirable this may be - Jesus replacing the inherited Mosaic supper with a renewed Christian Passover, himself taking the place of the Paschal Lamb, it cannot have been so in real life.

14:17-25

The Markan Last Supper divides into two: first, Jesus’ prediction that one of the Twelve will give him over; second, the predictions of his violent death and ultimate victory in the Words of Institution.

When evening came: this is the right time for the Passover meal, as opposed to an ordinary dinner which used to be eaten in the late afternoon. They recline for the meal, instead of sitting as usual, because it is a more formal occasion, and also to express the theme of freedom which is the heart of Passover. Ps 41:9 is evoked: *one of you eating with me*. The prediction is entirely accurate, and this involves us in meditation on the degree of penetration Jesus has, and on the closeness of evil: sharing the table is the epitome of intimacy in the ancient Near East.

The unlikeliness of Jesus’ prediction is stressed by the grief of the disciples, their verbless question (“Not I?”) is echoed in an equally verbless response from Jesus, literally: “One of the Twelve, the one dipping with me in the one dish.” The Son of Man

is going, as the Scriptures say: this “going” may result in his death, but the prime meaning is that he is going to the people to whom that miserable man will hand him over - that is, the Sanhedrin. So there is already a reason for his going in the Word of God; but the man who collaborates in his handing-over is still an agent of evil, a true criminal (as opposed to Jesus, who, despite his condemnation to crucifixion, is guiltless). The horror of the judgment that awaits that man is *worse* than the fate to which he delivers the Son of Man.

The words of institution of the Eucharist follow. Cf Luke 22:15-20, which is the better-attested version. 1 Cor 11:23-26 dates from 51 AD but the tradition it quotes must be even earlier. The differences between that tradition and Mark may be explained by the fact that Jesus in Mark is *predicting the future*; the longing of Jesus to eat the Passover is not of interest in this context, and neither is the consequently uncued statement that Jesus will not eat the Passover again until the Kingdom comes. Nor does he include the taking of the cup, the thanksgiving, or the command to distribute it: it contains no prediction, and is left out. However, he does include the remark about the new wine, because it contains the vital prediction of Jesus’ ultimate victory. Note also the statement that “all drank from it”. This stresses the perfidy of Judas, who here is included among those who drink the Lord’s cup.

What we have here then is in effect a renewed prediction of the Passion; on the eve of his death the Messiah reiterates his destiny for the disciples to hear.