

# Mark - chapters 4 & 5

---

## Chapter 4

Chapter Four and Chapter 13 represent the two main blocks of *teaching* in the Gospel.

The theme of 13 is the end of time. This earlier block is composed of the Marcan parables. It may be useful for us to examine this literary form and try to understand what is meant by the word *parabole*.

The Greek word means “placing things side by side for comparison”. Despite recent fashion for seeking a very close and limited meaning, the word is in fact very wide in its use and reference. In the OT the word translates the Hebrew word *mashal*, referring to various literary forms: proverbs, riddles, taunting-songs, oracles, metaphors and allegories, lessons on history, similes, and the familiar narrative-form adopted so specially by Jesus.

We could perhaps distinguish metaphor, simile, and allegory as forms. A *simile* openly likens one thing to another of a different kind: for instance, “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves”. In *metaphor* the qualities of the one thing are ascribed directly to the other: for instance, “You are the salt of the earth”. *Allegory* is much more complicated: here every detail or character is significant, often carrying a hidden meaning.

The parables of Jesus cover a wide range of differences. Some of them are grouped, but we do not know whether Jesus told them in groups, or whether they were assembled into groups by the evangelists. Certainly in Mark 4 we have three parables about *seeds*, one of which (the so-called parable of the sower) is given an allegorical explanation; there are also some parabolic sayings: the image of the lamp on its stand, and of the measure.

Jesus is described as sitting in the sea (rather than in the boat). This oddity enables him to group the whole audience on the land, and to *sow the word* among them from his contrasting watery position. He begins with the command to listen, and the subject matter of what follows is intimately connected with the power to listen effectively. V 9 will reinforce this theme. All the seed parables are about the rejection of Jesus by some and the acceptance of him by others.

**The Parable of the Seeds** bears witness to a favourite plan for storytellers, in proposing *three* incidents. In every culture the “rule of three” characterizes stories, with the punch usually coming in the last instance. This story is different. The first three sowings *all* come to grief. It is in the *fourth* that the story changes; and there is a graceful echo of this unexpected twist in the arithmetic: we are given the progressive scale of yield: “thirty - sixty - “ we expect *ninety* but instead “- a hundredfold!” The unexpectedness of the last quantity emphasises the working of the parable.

The little dialogue which follows has been the focus of much discussion. The quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 has puzzled many people. It describes the *result* of the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus, and the *result* of the proclamation of the crucified one by the Church, rather than the *purpose* of these proclamations. So in the fate of the *teaching* of Jesus there is prefigured the rejection and the suffering he will endure. The disciples, however, will see what is hidden - they will see in the struggling, suffering Jesus the onset of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is therefore imprecise to conclude that Jesus is being deliberately obscure in his use of parable.

Rather, the fate of his parables will typify and reveal the fate of his message and of his life; parables are therefore an experience of judgment.

The allegorical interpretation of our parable may or may not be from Jesus. It has been pointed out that Jesus habitually leaves the parable to the hearers to interpret, in the spirit of 4:9 ("Anyone who has ears for listening should listen!"). It has even been suggested that allegory would have been foreign to Jesus' world of thought. In fact there are collections of allegory in the OT which Jesus would have known well. And it is almost certain that a Church interpreter writing up this explanation would have begun by identifying the Sower himself with Jesus - which doesn't happen. What is disturbing is the tremendous attention paid in the explanation to the different sorts of soil, where the parable itself seems to put all the emphasis on the abundance of the yield where the soil is good. Much of the language would also indicate a later setting for this part of the chapter, especially the use of "word" for the Gospel message.

***The Seed Growing Secretly*** has a similar theme - the smallness of what is sown, leading to the greatness of the harvest. The sower does not have influence over this growth, but he knows how to respond when it is complete.

***The Mustard-seed*** once more stresses the contrast between the seed and its dramatic result.

There follow four miraculous events which continue to build up the picture of Jesus' amazing power and authority over Satan - in nature, in possession, in disease, and in death.

***The Stilling of the Storm at Sea*** is an act which resounds with divine power; only God can command the waters of the sea (cf Ps 74:13-14, 89:10-12). Jesus' being asleep shows his sense of trust in God, and the question, "Who can this be?" implies only one answer for the believer.

## Chapter 5

The three remaining miracles are great set-pieces of Markan storytelling.

### ***The Gerasene Demoniac***

The man has an *unclean* spirit. Note that Mark's gospel is written in a pagan environment, where pigs were considered appropriate sacrificial animals, and where people used frequently to eat sacred meals in cemeteries. Yet here the unclean spirit is associated with the ritual uncleanness Jews perceived in the tomb and in the pig. This bears eloquent witness to the Jewish origins of the story. Negatives cluster about the description: literally, "not with a chain no longer no one was able to bind him". The setting in the tombs relates his miserable condition to death; his power to break chains and fetters stresses the great power of what holds him enslaved, and the presence of the mountains speak of the wilderness in which he is condemned to wander - there is no sentimentality about mountain-ranges amongst the Jews.. This terrifying person runs at Jesus in a way that must habitually have repelled those trying to subdue him. But on his arrival, instead of struggling or attacking Jesus, he is compelled to worship him. The demonic voice seems to attempt a counter-exorcism, using the name of God against Jesus. Jesus has been commanding him to come out; but this does not work, and Jesus demands to know the devil's name - necessary for exorcism to be effective. The possessing voice cannot oppose or refuse him. The reason for the failure of the exorcism is then revealed: there are many demons in the man, not one; and the name *Legion*, which is Latin, seems to give them the number of six thousand (the complement of a Roman legion). Now that Jesus knows this name, the fate of the demons is sealed. Their request to be given a new home in the pigs backfires badly; even the unclean animals cannot abide their presence,

and the demons find themselves homeless and bound in the deep water. The tradition is that demons loathe water. So the miracle is in fact a double victory: one for the possessed man, and one over the demons.

### ***The Daughter of Jairus and the Woman with a Haemorrhage***

We should compare this account with the parallel in Matthew (9:18-26). The exercise is instructive in revealing the abundance of Mark's detail, which the sober Matthew severely edits.

The two stories are intertwined: for what reason? Perhaps Mark wants to see the deliverance of the woman from sickness as a step towards the deliverance of the little girl from death; perhaps he wants to display the two threats as similar or interconnected; but the plain and obvious reason is that *this was how it happened*. Certainly the intertwining is never interfered with by the subsequent evangelists. The literary effect is a heightening of tension; while Jesus is diverted to cope with the sick woman, the little girl is at the point of death.

We are given in this story further sustained evidence of Jesus' influence and power. His magnetism is not diminished by the incident of being asked to leave the region of the Gerasenes. Rather there is already a huge crowd waiting for him as he comes ashore. The President of the Synagogue, a man of influence himself, comes to seek his help. He is so desperate that he falls at Jesus' feet in supplication. This posture opens him to the possibility of worship, which is the eventually appropriate attitude envisaged by the Gospel. The space opened up for the eventual miracle is thus a very large one. The crowd is mentioned again, and is actually crushing Jesus (in contrast to 3:9 where there was simply a *danger* of being crushed). Then enter the woman. The sentence is very complex, with the actual verb relegated to the very end: "And a woman being in a flow of blood twelve years, and many things suffering by many physicians, and having spent the with her all things, and nothing having been profited but rather to the worse having come, hearing the things about Jesus, coming in the crowd behind, TOUCHED the garment of him." It is as if she comes to the deed of touching *loaded* with all that has gone before, and we feel almost a sympathetic frustration as we wait for what she eventually did.

The flow of Jesus' healing even through his garments emphasises his power and also the woman's faith: this is stressed by Mark, who gives us a window into her mind at this moment. The immediacy of the healing is in sharp contrast to that expensive twelve years of worse-than-useless multi-disciplinary medical treatment. Jesus' knowledge of the healing is supernatural. It stands out boldly from the ordinary attitudes of the disciples: they only see the crowd pressing round him, but he knows that one person in the crowd has experienced him quite specially. He looks around for her: he knows she is there. His address to her as "daughter" enrols her as a member of his new family (cf the fate of the old one in ch.3). The reference to her faith confirms his knowledge of her having touched him in a different way from the rest of the crowd. She is *now* fearful and trembling - with reverential awe because of the power of her healing. This sets her in sharp contrast to Jairus, who in a moment will be *forbidden* to fear.

Now the crisis occurs and the messengers arrive with their cruel and dismissive message. Jesus overhears and replies with short, sharp imperatives, literally: *Not fear, only trust*. Reaching the house he takes with him the three principal disciples (Transfiguration/Gethsemane). Mark emphasises the simplicity of his actions and words, in sharp contrast to the way such stories are normally told: there is no apparatus of magic or ritual: he takes her by the hand, and in the simplest way says in his own language the words that will raise her. Even in the OT (1K17, 2K4) such miracles are reported with much more manipulation and detail. By this simplicity Mark continues to build up methodically the impression of Jesus' effortless power.

It is usual to see in the command to keep silent about the miracle an instance of the "Messianic

Secret” which has been proposed as a *leitmotiv* in Mark; it is equally colourable to suggest that this, and the command to give her something to eat, is intended to give Jesus time to escape the crowd outside *before* the uproar which will follow the publication of the news. If they were ready to crush him on his way in, they might come to succeed on his way out.