

MARK 6

1 - 6 : A Visit To Nazareth

Jesus goes to his home town, but his reception is uniquely unfavourable. We can isolate the questions they ask about him, and offer them new responses as follows:

i. "Where did the guy get all this?" No response is offered to this question, but it echoes previous questions: in 2:7 (the paralytic lowered through the roof) in response to Jesus' saying: "My child, your sins are forgiven," some scribes think to themselves, "He is blaspheming. *Who* can forgive sins but God?" and in 4:41 (the calming of the storm at sea) the disciples are overcome with awe and say to each other: "*Who* can this be? Even the wind and sea obey him." The reader will know how to answer the question: it will be in terms of the scene at the Baptism, where the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus.

ii. "What is the wisdom granted to him, and the miracles worked through his hands?" The question is already sceptical, accepting the wisdom and miracles as undeniable, but speaking of the wisdom as "given to him" - perhaps as opposed to having been acquired through rabbinic studies - and speaking of the miracles as "worked through his hands" - that is, presumably, worked by someone else using him as an instrument. The question literally asks for a judgment on the quality of the gifts he displays. Again, the faithful reader recalls the voice of God acknowledging Jesus as his beloved Son, in whom he is well-pleased; the character of his works is thus divinely guaranteed.

iii. "This guy is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters too, are they not here with us?" The question implies the answer yes; and the implicit remark is that no origin for wisdom or miracles could be assigned to these familiar and humble factors in his background. But we have heard him announced, not as a carpenter, but by John the Baptist as "one who is more powerful than I am"; calling him "Mary's Son" misses the point that he has been announced as "Son of God" - in the title of the Gospel, at the Baptism, by the unclean spirits at 3:11, and by the Gerasene demoniac; the identification of Jesus by his blood-brothers misses the point that another Simon, with his brother Andrew, and another James, with his brother John, dropped everything to follow him; and speaking of his sisters fails to recall the recent healing of the woman with the haemorrhage (whom he addressed as "my daughter", and the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. The questions about his earthly family miss the point that he has a new family of *brothers, sisters, and mothers*, over which he presides.

Altogether, their "wonderment" over him is converted into "taking offence" at him (*eskandalizonto*). The root *skandalon* means a trap or a stumbling-block; these people are trapped by their familiarity with Jesus into contempt for him. The word is also associated with the Cross itself ("to the Jews, a *skandalon* that they cannot get over"); the Gospel of the Crucified One will elicit the identical response among the Jews that Jesus now finds among his fellow-Nazarenes. The reason for "a few" miracles taking place "through his hands" is clear: as they have heard his wisdom *and rejected it*, so they have to see his miracles (at least a few) in order to reject them as well. It is amazing to Jesus that they do not believe, but most especially because his wisdom and his miracles *invalidate* their disbelief.

6b - 29: Jesus' Authority extended through his Apostles

This passage sees Jesus' authority re-asserted after the disturbing failure caused by the

faithlessness of the Nazarenes. Not only does he give orders to the Twelve, but he shares with them his dramatic power over evil at its most entrenched - demonic possession. Here is the verb *apostellein* - the sending out of authorized representatives. They are sent two by two, because of the legal requirement that every testimony requires two voices to be believed. This is well-attested throughout the Bible, and you can see it operating at Jesus' trial, where the witnesses speak in twos. You can see Mark stressing the authority-words: he summons them, sends them, gives them *exousia* over the unclean spirits, charges them to take this and not that, and even predicts their fate when they arrive: people will receive them, listen to them, and feed them - he has complete confidence - and where this is not so, they must shake off the dust as a prophetic warning; resistance to the message will be dangerous.

We can tell that this part of the Gospel is using original tradition, and that Mark is not modelling his picture of the apostles on Jesus, by two differences: Jesus heals by laying on hands, where the apostles use anointing - the rubbing on of olive oil. Also Jesus could work only a few miracles at Nazareth, where the disciples cast out many devils, and heal many who are sick.

We can see an echo in this of the prediction in 1: 17 that Jesus would make them into fishers of human beings; notice that these words were spoken to two *pairs* of apostles; now the prediction has been fulfilled, and Jesus will increasingly be presented as one who can foretell the future perfectly.

It is this outpouring of miracles that causes a surge in Jesus' reputation, even to the extent that Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee and Perea, comes to think that John the Baptist has risen from the dead - and is thus capable of deeds which far outweigh those he did prior to his execution. This further emphasises the power of Jesus outstripping that of John, which has already been mentioned by John himself. There is another theme here: the heroic identifications of Jesus with John the Baptist or Elijah allow people to accept the veracity of the miracles *without* having to become his disciples. They are able to acknowledge the miracles without accepting that Jesus is their living cause. Thus the story illustrates the lengths to which people have to go in order to evade the call of the Gospel.

In the story of John's martyrdom, we find Herod referred to as "the king", which prepares us for his offer, on oath, of "half his kingdom". In fact Augustus refused to make him a king, and made him a mere tetrarch. But the setting serves further to stress the greatness of John, whose head is worth more than half a kingdom; the implication follows that if Jesus is greater than John, he is exceedingly great.

Furthermore, Herod is so impressed by Jesus, that he can identify him with a man whose head turned up in his own dining-room on a plate, and whose body was reverently buried in a different place. He must have been considerably struck.

30 - 44: *The Feeding of Five Thousand Males with Five Loaves and Two Fish*

The narrative continues to stress the power of Jesus to make things happen. This story is one that is told six times in the Gospels, and the only miracle story that crosses the divide between the Synoptics and John.

It is easy to see the magnetic power of Jesus' attraction - working now not only in him but

through the apostles - drawing the large crowd together that is waiting as his boat comes to shore. They are a shepherdless flock, so he responds by teaching them and then by feeding them. There are of course great depths in anything so central to the Gospel tradition as this miracle; the gathering in response to Jesus is surely an image of the eventual Church he will create out of the nations. It is also the figure of the "Church" Moses moulded out of the liberated People of God. The Shepherd in both cases is the Messiah, in one or other sense. When Jesus has taught the crowd, the disciples want to send them away - to disperse the Church. But this atomization is not according to the will of Christ. "Feed them yourselves" is a ridiculous command, because a single picnic is insufficient for it to be reasonable. But Jesus has the power to make this meal more than enough for all. Therefore the Church is not dispersed, and what Jesus has taught them spiritually is underscored and reinforced by something physical. Clearly here we are on the brink of something we can call *sacramental*. The spiritual commitment of Jesus to the needs of the people is to be embodied in a physical sign, to be received by all. This is not the Eucharist: there is no fish in the Eucharist, and there is no wine in the miracle, and the account does not have the proclaimed theology of the sacramental presence of Jesus to make it so ("This is my body..given for you"); but the setting is already like the setting of a gathering of believers to receive teaching which leads on to their physical feeding, and the link between the teaching and the feeding and the unity of the Church is already made, in the context of what it means to be a shepherd.

45 - 52: Jesus Walks On Water

The disciples are *compelled* into the boat without Jesus, who sends away the crowd and ascends the mountain to pray to the God whose Son he will reveal himself to be in this story. The violent word for separation will prepare for the dramatic reunion that is coming. The boat is not doing well, and there is a head wind. There is not danger, only failure. Jesus is in a different place from the disciples, and without him they are helpless.

Walking on Water: Job 9:8, 39:16; Ps 77:20; Eccles 24:5-6

Passing By: Ex 33:19, 22; 34:5-6; !K 19:11, Amos 7:8, 8:2; Dan 12:1

Divine name at theophany: *egw eimi*.

The amazement of the disciples at the abating of the wind is related by Mark to their "hardheartedness" over the miracle of the loaves.