

Mark 7

The first part of this chapter deals with the traditions of the Pharisees and questions of ritual cleanliness. Some people think that in this area Mark is trying to deal with genuine pastoral problems within his Church - that Markan Christians are undergoing crises about the Jewish laws of ritual purity.

This may seem unlikely, in that Mark would surely not have to explain what these traditions are so carefully if they were already known, and accepted as potentially binding, by even some of the members of his Church. So it seems possible that in depicting Jesus as Son of God, Mark wants to describe his authority as sufficient to allow him to set aside parts of the Law of Moses. So what we are seeing here could be seen as a graphic depiction of the power of Jesus over the Law of God (cf 2:28, "the Son of Man is master even of the Sabbath").

On the other hand, it also seems essential, as we are on this journey through the Gospel, to acknowledge that the attitude of Jesus to the Old Testament, and in particular to its Law, is central to our understanding of Christianity - as opposed to his own lifelong Judaism - and that we need to know the view Jesus took about how the keeping of the Commandments related to salvation. This is the major question in the letters of Paul to the Galatians and to the Romans, and indeed at many other points in his writing. We must use the evidence about Jesus that the Gospels give us to test our conclusions about this very central issue.

In the chapter we are discussing we are shown a debate about hand-washing. Notice that the incident arises because of "the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come up from Jerusalem"; now, this in itself raises a problem. We have seen that large crowds described earlier - specifically at 3.22 - include scribes who have come down from Jerusalem; we have also had the fasting of the Pharisees referred to as something in which Jesus did not share (2:18). We might conclude that, from the beginning, Jesus was finding himself at loggerheads with the religious establishment represented by these men. Some people see the implacable hatred that grows between Jesus and these groups through the gospels as the ultimate cause of his crucifixion - and this understanding obviously opens up the can of worms that is Christian self-righteousness towards the Jews *precisely in their religion* as represented by Pharisaism, and thus to eventual anti-semitism. But *did* Pharisees actually travel up into Galilee to investigate the state of the hands of Jesus' disciples there?

We should remember that the workings that led to the death of Jesus are not in the hands of the Pharisees but of the priests, who were Sadducees; so rather than his attitude to the Law - which is the heart of the upsets with Pharisees - it is his attitude to the concerns of the *priests* that leads to his death. We can see that the priests were largely concerned with the affairs of the state of Israel. Jesus, instead, concerned himself with the proclamation of the kingdom of God. This already had a tremendous effect on his audience. It raised the profile of his message into religious realms and above merely temporary, political considerations. The priests were watching the political field like hawks, determined to snuff out anything that might threaten the balance they had struck with the Roman Empire. Jesus' concern with the Kingdom took on the flavours of the End of the World. He stood in the Temple and predicted its downfall; he spoke

of a new form of worship that would not require earthly apparatus, but would be in spirit and in truth. He predicted a catastrophic collapse of the present world-order, and it is hard to believe that he did not connect this with the growing awareness of his own death which appears in the second half of the Gospel. Ordinary people knew that the Roman Empire would not be shifted by anything less than a universal catastrophe: and was not the message of Jesus speaking of something on that scale? His preaching of the Kingdom of God is also open to the eventual transcending of Jewish nationalism which characterizes the mission and understanding of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. Did he ever foresee such a mission? And even if we can find a warrant for such a mission in his words within the Gospels, might not these words be inserted by the subsequent generations, living in the context of the mission as it happened?

How far do these thoughts and principles represent the real Jesus?

The answering of these questions is less mountainous a task than it used to be. But we can't answer them with the kind of certainty we would like. Some huge hypotheses have been constructed, but all seem to have taken something for granted. Catholics have largely listened to the Church to tell them who Jesus was, what he was doing, and why he was crucified. But this is hardly radical enough; are we entirely sure that Jesus actually intended to found a Church to exist after his death? The Church always says he did; but then it would, wouldn't it? And are we sure about the insistence in the New Testament that Jesus understood his death in a special way, and freely accepted it? What were his thoughts if he did so? Some Protestant scholars believe that Jesus was condemned because he had decided that Judaism was finished, and that he was threatening to turn it over (this was what his language meant about the end of the Temple, the cleansing of the Temple, and the breaking of the Sabbath law and the laws of diet). But then there are Jewish scholars who have studied the Gospel record with great care, who have failed to find in Jesus anything the Pharisees could have objected to. Some even suggest that his more worrying outbursts upset the Pharisees precisely *because he himself was a Pharisee!* He did not in fact incur any *criminal* penalty by anything he said or did; these scholars cannot account for his death in his religious attitudes, and some of them suggest that he must therefore have perished for political reasons. In John, who is vigorously anti-Jewish, we are told that the priests decided on his death because their own influence over the people was being threatened by the increasing influence of Jesus; that they found his language and behaviour dangerous and - in Roman eyes - potentially subversive, and that they therefore decreed his death *at any price* so that the people would survive. That might appear as a political motive, but a religious one too; the priority of the survival of the people over the life of one individual is a religious statement. Could the priests have been so motivated, so close to the committing of a political assassination?

Read Sanders.