

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Spring, 2010**

The Gospel of Mark

**II. Mark 3:7 – 4:41
What Kind of Kingdom?**

Like any good story Mark's gospel has a narrator and characters and a plot. Much of the plot revolves around conflict—conflict between Jesus, the hero of our story, and those who oppose him or misunderstand him or even set out to destroy him.

Last week's passage ended as the Pharisees and the Herodians begin to counsel together about how they might get Jesus killed.

In today's passage there are two other kinds of opposition. The first opposition comes from the scribes who come from Jerusalem to watch Jesus perform his marvelous healings. They do not doubt for a minute that Jesus is able to heal people. What they suspect, however, is that Jesus does his healings using black magic, using powers that have been given to him by Satan.

In Jesus' world and in Mark's world people were defined by the spirits that drove them. Those who were blessed were driven by the spirit of God. Those who were cursed were driven by a spirit of evil. The scribes acknowledge that Jesus has done amazing things in healing sick people and calming distressed people, but they say that he must be working for Satan.

Jesus says that if they'll just open their eyes they'll notice that he is working against Satan. His business, his mission, is to free people from Satan's power. So of course he cannot be working both for Satan and against Satan at the same time. He uses several figures of speech to make his point, mini-parables really. A house divided against itself can't stand nor a kingdom endure. Satan can't fight Satan. Here Jesus sounds like a very wise teacher; "think about it," he says, "What you're suggesting is impossible."

Then he speaks more strongly. There is only one sin that can't be forgiven. It's called the Sin against the Holy Spirit, and here's what the sin seems to look like. If God is using someone to do enormous good and we claim that the do-gooder is on Satan's side, we're not just slandering the do-gooder we're slandering the good God.

The other opposition comes not from Jesus' opponents but from his family. They think he must be out of his mind to claim the powers that he claims, to name God as if he belonged to God in some unique and saving way.

When faced with opposition from the scribes Jesus defends the power of the Holy Spirit. When faced with opposition from his family Jesus re-defines the family. He looks past his biological family and looks straight at his family in faith and says: "Whoever does God's will is my true brother and sister and mother." He doesn't say that some of his followers are his "father" because God is his father and their father, too. We can guess that Mark tells this story to comfort those in his community who have been opposed by their own families. If they look around them at the other Christians who are listening to this story, they will find that they have a new family, the believing community.

Mark chapter four is a series of parables. The Greek root for the word "parable" means "something thrown up against something else." Jesus throws a story about a sower up against the promises of faith, and he throws the picture of a mustard seed up against the promise of God's kingdom. When these realities are compared and contrasted—the seed and the kingdom for example—we understand the kingdom better than we have before.

One thing we understand about the kingdom is that it is already present among us. Toward the end of his gospel, in chapter 13, Mark will quote Jesus telling the disciples about the Kingdom that is to come at the end of time. But here in chapter 4 the Kingdom is already present—it's present like a sower who sows seed (or a preacher who sows the word of God); it is present like a planting that seems to begin with very little but ends with an amazing abundance of fruit. The Kingdom is here the way a crop is here that seems to grow by itself until suddenly, it's harvest time and the bounty we have ignored pops up all around us. The kingdom is here the way a mustard seed is here; not much to look at but containing in itself all the latent power one day to form a bush large enough for birds to shelter there.

Some New Testament scholars think that the long explanation that Jesus gives of the Parable of the Sower is a later addition to what Jesus really said in Galilee. It seems too complicated and confused for the kind of parable we expect from Jesus.

Professor Mary Ann Tolbert thinks that the parable and its explanation give us another clue to Mark's story. (*Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*) The different kinds of soil in Mark 4:13-20 symbolize the different kinds of people who hear the word from Jesus in Mark's Gospel. For some, like the scribes and Pharisees, the word never takes root. Others are like the rocky ground because

they are faithful just as long as it is safe to be faithful and then they scramble. Maybe Mark wants us to think of Peter here, whose nickname means “rocky” and who does tend to head for the hills when opposition grows. Other characters are wooed away by wealth; the rich man of Mark 10 is one of these, but so is Judas who is bribed into betrayal. Other characters are the good ground, these are the faithful people who usually appear only briefly in Mark’s Gospel, but who do have faith and who do receive the blessing—the woman with the flow of blood in chapter 5, Blind Bartimaeus in chapter 10, maybe even the centurion who looks at Jesus on the cross and says: “This really was God’s son.”

Many scholars also suspect that Mark 4:10-12 is Mark’s addition to Jesus’ parables. If we just read the parables we would think that Jesus told them to clarify his message. But these verses suggest that he tells parables to complicate his message, so that insiders will get it but outsiders won’t.

Whether or not this was a theme in Jesus’ ministry it is a major theme in Mark’s portrayal of that ministry. The Kingdom of God is a mystery, a secret; insiders get it and outsiders don’t.

What’s more, Mark will say, sometimes people who seem to be insiders (like the disciples) end up very far out indeed.

General Questions:

1. How does Mark build suspense in his story? Is it a problem that we already know how the story comes out? (Probably many of those who first read/heard his gospel knew, too.)

2. To this day there's a kind of cynicism which thinks that every generosity is really self-serving and every sacrifice is really self-aggrandizement. People look at what the Holy Spirit is doing and are so jaundiced that they say: "Oh, that's just Satan, or selfishness, or human nature at its worst." How do we acknowledge and transcend this cynicism in others? In ourselves?

3. How do you understand the way Jesus uses parables? Are there ways in which parables can help us understand Christian claims today? Are there times in which parables get in the way of understanding?

Focus Text Questions:

1. Do you identify more with the sower or the soils in Jesus' parable? If you see yourself in the sower, is the parable comforting? discomfoting? other? If you identify with the soil, can you imagine soil improving itself? If not, why does Jesus tell the parable? How is it a meaningful parable for you?

2. Jesus' job is not easy: telling how God works in the world. If you were to tell a parable that helped others understand what God's power means to you, what might you say?

3. How do you understand the term “Kingdom of God”? Some think it sounds too much like a place and suggest “realm of God” and others think it’s too much of another era and want something like “God’s commonwealth.” How might the phrase take on meaning for us today?

For Further Study:

- Mary Ann Tolbert, “How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character,” *Interpretation* 47 (1993), 347-357.