

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

The Gospel of Mark

VII. Mark 14:1 – 15:47
A Soldier's Epiphany

Mark's Gospel has been driving relentlessly toward these chapters about Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. As early as chapter 3 we have learned that Jesus' enemies are plotting to have him destroyed. Three times, in chapters 8, 9 and 10 Jesus tells his disciples of his destined suffering and death. In chapter 6 the death of John the Baptist foreshadows Jesus' own death and the first time that Judas Iscariot is introduced to our story, in Mark 3:19, we learn that Judas will betray the master who calls him.

The shadow of Jerusalem looms over the ministry in Galilee; on the way Jesus shows amazing compassion, wisdom and power. But the way leads toward the cross.

We will begin at the foot of the cross itself and then go back briefly to review the final events that bring our story toward crucifixion.

In telling the story of the crucifixion Mark uses two devices that indicate again how carefully he weaves his plot (or how wisely he shapes the telling of the story he remembers).

For one thing Mark relies very heavily on irony to tell his story. Irony works in a story when the reader of the story knows what the actors in the story do not know. When actions and words have meanings far beyond what the characters in the tale realize.

Sometimes in our passage Mark uses dramatic irony. When the soldiers dress Jesus in a royal purple robe, for example, and place a crown of thorns on his head and hail him as King of the Jews, they think they are acting out a parody of a coronation. The readers, however, know that Jesus is indeed the King, the King who suffers, and ironically, therefore, the parody enacts a truth far deeper than the soldiers know (Mark 15:16-20).

Sometimes Mark uses verbal irony. Words that Jesus' opponents cite as insults can be read by the wise reader as both true and redemptive. For instance when Jesus

hangs on the cross the chief priests and the scribes say: “He saved others; he cannot save himself.” (Mark 15:31) Of course believers know that only because he cannot, or will not, save himself can he save others. What the leaders think of as mockery could be sung by believers as a hymn of praise.

The other device that Mark uses to tell his story is to draw very heavily on the Old Testament, and especially on Psalm 22 to provide echoes, or foreshadowings of Jesus’ passion. Psalm 22 presents poetically many of the themes that Mark provides dramatically. “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.” (Ps.22:7) “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (Ps. 22:18) Most strikingly Psalm 22 begins with the very words that Jesus cries on the cross—the last words he speaks in all of Mark’s Gospel: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Different scholars interpret the close relationship between Mark 15 and Psalm 22 in different ways. Some scholars think that the Old Testament time and again predicts in quite exact terms what will happen to God’s Messiah. For them the close link between Psalm 22 and Mark’s Gospel simply shows that Jesus fulfilled what the psalmist prophesied of him.

Other scholars think that Mark took the story of Jesus’ passion and shaped it in such a way that it would remind early readers and hearers of a scriptural passage they knew – Psalm 22.

Still others think that Mark rightly records Jesus’ last words from the cross – who would have chosen these words to make a theological point? – and then may shape the rest of the story with Psalm 22 also in mind.

In any case we are left with one major affirmation. For Mark Jesus’ death is not a terrible mistake; Jesus fits a pattern already established in the Old Testament, of the righteous one who suffers out of loyalty to God.

This brings us to the verse that is the center of our discussion today. In Mark 15:39 a centurion cries out: “Truly this was Son of God.” Unfortunately the Greek text is a little ambiguous here. It could mean, “Truly this man was ‘The Son of God’” or “truly this man was a son of God.”

However since Mark (and God) have told us from Mark 1:1 through Jesus’ baptism and the transfiguration that Jesus is THE Son of God, and not just a godly person (which is what “a son of God” might mean) our sense is that Mark’s Gospel is driving us not just to a kind of confession of Jesus’ innocence (that’s what the

centurion does in Luke's Gospel) but to a claim of Christian faith: Truly this was God's Son.

(Those who stress irony in Mark's Gospel think that the centurion may be being ironic here, saying something like: "Some Son of God this is!" But even if this is the case, we remember that in Mark ironic statements are used to proclaim the truth. "Indeed he is.")

Remember that we have said that Mark is a careful weaver of his story, preacher of his gospel. It seems far more likely that here the centurion says what the reader has come to believe: "This man really was the Son of God." What is so striking is that the centurion does not say this after one of Jesus' miracles, not even at the site of the empty tomb. He looks at the cross and says: "Truly this was God's Son."

For Mark the fullest embodiment of God comes just when Jesus is most weak—even deserted by God. And the centurion who believes is not a disciple, not even a Jew, he's a Gentile—an outsider brought into God's family by God's mercy.

Chapter 14 and 15 lead us to the cross, to this desertion and to this affirmation. In the preceding passages one disciple denies Jesus and another betrays him. At the foot of the cross none of the inner circle is there, and even the women stand at a distance.

The woman who anoints Jesus foretells his death and burial. Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross, something Jesus has told us all faithful people sometimes have to do.

Pilate in one final ironic gesture sticks a sign over the cross which he thinks is absolutely silly and we know is ultimately true: "The King of the Jews."

3. To an outsider Peter does not come out much better than Judas here. Neither stands with Jesus at the end. Why do Mark and the early Christians judge Judas more harshly?

Focus Text Questions:

1. What do you think the Centurion means by his claim at the foot of the cross, and what might that mean for our reading of this whole passage, this whole Gospel?

2. Both John and Luke tell the story of the crucifixion in ways that make Jesus seem much less abandoned and discouraged at the end. Do you find Mark's portrayal of Jesus last hours unbearably stark...or if there is some hope here, where do you see it?

For Further Study:

- Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 129-135.