

The Good News as told by Mark (5)

Jesus introduces the kingdom (2)

A kingdom of forgiveness

Jesus comes announcing, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near.” The question immediately arises, “What is this kingdom like?” Mark quickly directs us towards the answer to this question. It starts with a simple display of power and authority (1:21-28). The spirits recognise Jesus for who he is and the people who witness his works and hear his words acknowledge that Jesus is “one having authority”. That Jesus is able to do great things is presented to us from the outset of Mark’s account, and he will return to this matter on a number of occasions. The next question is, even if Jesus is able, is he willing? Who can benefit from this awesome power? That question is answered by the very next story - anyone in need (1:40-45). Jesus has shown himself to be both able and willing.

So Mark begins to describe this new kingdom. In the kingdom of God the old powers will be overthrown (1:24). This much was expected. The common expectation was that the Messiah would come and overthrow the enemies and oppressors of God’s people. This was correct, to a certain extent. The mistake was in the identity of these enemies, and the means by which they would be overthrown. The driving force behind the kingdom of God is not to be raw power, nor vengeance, nor even righteousness, it was to be compassion, illustrated in the story of the leper.

Now a new question arises. Compassion for someone in need is one thing, but we are separated from God by more than our condition in life. If compassion is to be the defining mark of the kingdom then something new will be required if this compassion is to be effective, rather than just a feeling.

Mark 2:1-12

If Jesus’ power to bring release and renewal is shown by his authority over the unclean spirits (1:21-28) and his willingness by his compassion for the leper (1:40-45), then this present story points to another barrier that must be overcome. Demons, ill-health and social exclusion are not the only things that mar life in the coming kingdom - there is the question of sin. Jesus approaches this head on.

This is the first mention of sin in Mark’s Gospel. We are not told why Jesus brings up the question of sin in this case and not earlier. Did he see a connection between this man’s illness and his moral state that was not an issue with the leper or the others he had helped? Is it only one among many that need their sins dealt with? This seems unlikely, so was it to make a point to the crowd, and particularly the religious leaders present, that Jesus makes the connection here? Possibly, but it might also be possible that Mark is leading us towards a bigger revelation and he is carefully and skilfully leading us to an inescapable conclusion.

The story of this paralysed man is as dramatic as it is graphic. Jesus is back in his home town and because of his growing notoriety has attracted a large crowd, so large in fact that the house is full and many people are excluded. One small group is particularly desperate to reach Jesus. Four friends have brought a paralysed man, carried on a stretcher, in the hope that Jesus will repeat his acts of

healing and cure their friend. Unable to gain access via the door they go onto the roof, dig through, and lower the stretcher right in front of Jesus. Jesus is impressed by the friends' faith and responds, not with healing but with forgiveness.

Nowhere in this story does Jesus, or anyone else, draw a connection between the man's paralysis and his need for forgiveness (though that issue is faced in other parts of the gospels, particularly John 9). The friends see the man's need for physical healing. Jesus sees a deeper need. The religious elite see blasphemy. Jesus plays the scribes' own game. They believe, firstly, that ultimately only God can forgive sins. In this they are correct. Secondly, they believe that there is a link between sin and ill health. Whether they are correct in this belief or not makes no difference. Jesus has declared the man is forgiven, now he asks the scribes if there is any difference, according to their view of things, between forgiveness and healing. They would have to answer that they believe they are one in the same. So to show the scribes that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin he shows them he has the authority, power and willingness to heal.

We see, then, a distinct development in Mark's picture of Jesus, his mission and the coming kingdom. It is a kingdom where even those on the furthest edge of society, and beyond, find acceptance and wholeness. And not only are the outcasts welcome as they are, but the past can be undone. Chains are broken, prisoners are released, the oppressed find relief and freedom and broken hearts are restored. And as this picture develops so people's opinions about Jesus intensifies, from, "What is this? A new teaching?" to, "We have never seen anything like this!"

In all the stories that have gone before this one Mark has told us of many who were cured, but I would suggest that this paralysed man is the first to be healed. This is the Good News, not simply that the leper is welcomed, or the sick find relief, but that sin is forgiven and the sinner restored.

Amen.

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