

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 50:5-9; Psalm 116 (114); James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

But who do you say I am? You are the Messiah.

Mark 8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This Gospel reading is a kind of hinge passage in Mark, forming the closure of the first part and opening the middle section of the Gospel. Naturally, the direct question of Jesus speaks to every generation, but it might be worth bearing in mind that there are three paragraphs in the Gospel: the identity of the Jesus, the passion prediction and the teaching on discipleship. All three are intimately connected.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

1. At the time, there was an expectation that the Messiah would be preceded by a

Moses-like figure and an Elijah-type figure.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deut 18:15)

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse. (Mal 4:5-6)

2. There is also a reference to the Suffering Servant songs from Isaiah 40-55. For more, see below the notes on the first reading.

KIND OF WRITING

Here we have three closely connected anecdotes or chreiai. In this part of Mark, the layout of the teaching on the suffering of the messiah is carefully patterned as follows:

A Passion Prediction (v. 31)

A (crass) misunderstanding (vv. 32-33)

A teaching on discipleship (vv. 34-35)

This pattern is repeated in ch. 9 and in ch. 10, as we shall see. It is part of the teaching of Mark that the destiny of the disciple cannot be other than the destiny of the master.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

1. The Passion Predictions

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of

Thought for the day

Each generation is addressed by Jesus' question in today's Gospel and each generation must speak for itself. So must we as individuals within the community of faith.

Prayer

Great and loving God, as we stand before the mystery of your disclosure in Jesus of Nazareth, we ask for great faith, deep understanding and, above all, love. Knowing him, we love him, loving him we confess him as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." (Mark 9:30-31)

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10:32-34)

2. Teaching on discipleship

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:36-38)

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to

them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:33–37)

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:41–45)

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ST PAUL

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. (Gal 6:11–17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 27 It is hard to figure why they were going so far north. Caesarea

Philippi was a centre of the imperial cult, as its name suggests. The question of Jesus’ identity is only apparently sudden because it has been the real topic of Mark 1-8 all along.

Verse 28 This takes us back to an earlier moment in the Gospel. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptiser has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” (Mark 6:14–16) Also, the quotations above from Deuteronomy and Malachi should not be forgotten.

Verse 29 Jesus persists and Peter confesses Jesus as messiah. This can only be a partial grasp, but it is a beginning.

Verse 30 As observed before, this command to silence may go back to Jesus, cautious about the inevitable political associations with Messiah. However, Mark intensifies the command and repeats it for his own theological purposes. It may be that he is offering an understanding not dissimilar to that in Rom 9-11. Paul teaches that God was able to use to rejection of Jesus as Messiah by most of God’s chosen people as a means of extending salvation to all humanity. We would say that it worked out like that. Mark would say it was God’s intention all along and therefore Jesus concealed his identity. It remains an enigma at the same time.

Verse 31 This is the first of the Passion Predictions. In general, scholars would not have a problem thinking Jesus began to foresee his fate, perhaps in the light of the fate of some prophets such as Jeremiah. However, the detailed predictions are usually held to be a *vaticinium ex eventu*, that is, a retrojection of later historical information.

Verse 32 Peter, the first to confess Jesus as Messiah, is also the first to misunderstand what kind of Messiah Jesus was called to be. “Rebuke” is a very strong word in the context. The range of meanings is to express strong disapproval of someone, rebuke, reprove, censure.

Verse 33 Before the words, the direction of the glance is very important: here is a teaching for all. Jesus then rebukes Peter in no uncertain terms. Robust Jewish debate may explain “Satan”, but it remains harsh. There is a heavy-handed play on words in the Greek. To

get “behind me” is the same expresses as to follow “behind me”! As for not grasping the ways of God, cf. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* (Is 55:8–9)

Verse 34 Historically, it cannot be that to take up your cross was already a metaphor—that can be so only after Jesus’ death. However, at the level of Mark, writing for a community under tremendous threat of persecution, the image retains its quite literal force.

Verse 35 Here is a genuine aphorism, in the form of cross-over (chiasmic) parallelism. Perhaps originally it did not contain the phrase “for the sake of the Gospel” which disturbs the balance of the phrases. Mark is willing to forego a literary perfectionism for the sake of the message!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “Who do you say that I am?” Imagine Jesus putting this question to you. How would you answer it? How would you answer it, not in words taken from a catechism or textbook, but from your own experience of the significance of Jesus in your life? What does Jesus mean to you? What does his gospel message mean to you?

2. Jesus went on to teach his disciples that following him would be hard at times. There would be a price to pay. Perhaps you also have found that imitating the love and compassion of Jesus is not an easy road? Nor does it come easy to have the constant trust in God that Jesus had. Yet Jesus tells us that this is the way to life. Would you agree?

3. There is a natural human tendency to shy away from what is painful or difficult. Yet if that is our standard pattern of behaviour we will not get far in reaching our potential. We will never find who we are capable of being. When have you found it worthwhile to face difficulties, persevere, ‘carry your cross’ for a while in order to achieve some goal that was important to you?

PRAYER

Make us one, O God, in acknowledging Jesus the Christ. As we proclaim him by our words, let us follow him in our works; give us strength to take up the cross and courage to lose our lives for his sake. Amen.

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith

Jas 2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Jas 2:18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.* 20 *Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is the passage which led Martin Luther to disparage the epistle of James, precisely because it seemed in contrast to Paul’s teaching on faith and works, at least as understood by Luther. Of course, Paul was not *against* works in the sense offered here. It goes without saying that faith to be real must be lived and Paul devotes a good deal of space to the ethical consequences of believing. The illustrations in the reading are engaging and blunt. Anyone with an ounce of *nous* will get the point.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The gap between conviction and life is registered in everyone and in every community. In this case, however, James focuses specifically on the service to the poor, a constant theme in the letter and obviously a real issue at the time. Again, it is, alas, never really out of date we can easily make connections with today’s reality.

KIND OF WRITING

Already in 1:22-27, the author had introduced this discussion under the heading of hearing and doing. Now, he expands on this teaching in 2:14-26.

Faith: (14-17)
Faith (14)
An example (15-16)
Conclusion (17)
 Faith and works: (18-20)

Diatribes (18-19)
Conclusion (20)
 Justification (21-26)
Abraham (21-23)
Conclusion (24)
Rahab (25)
Conclusion (26)

This means that our reading takes us from an initial discussion of faith into the following “diatribe.” Diatribe (apart from its everyday use) is a technical term in rhetoric. The speaker imagines someone in the audience interrupting and then engages them directly with “you” as in vv. 18-20 above. The passage is marked by considerable use of rhetorical questions, a feature of the epistle.

RELATED PASSAGES

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (Mark 8:36)

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Mark 12:31)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 The address reminds the hearts of their fellowship and communion in Christ. Profit is an echo of Jesus’ own teaching in Mark 8:36. The second question is formulated in Greek in a way to anticipate the answer “no”. We would say it like this: Surely that faith cannot save him, can it? The idea of faith *not saving* was a problem as noted above. Even in Paul, it is not *faith* which saves but God by means of faith. God’s gift, in the form of mercy, precedes everything: *For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.* (James 2:13)

Verses 15-16 Even before inclusive language, James names brothers *and sisters*, perhaps because women were (and can still be today) economically more vulnerable. Faith was clearly important in the teaching of Jesus: Mt 17:20; 21:21. Here James seems to correct Jesus, but he is not the first. There is a surprising expression in 1 Cor 13, in apparent “dialogue” with the Jesus tradition: *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

(1Corinthians 13:2) Here, at least, James and Paul agree! The impatience of the final question in v. 16 is palpable.

Verse 17 James often uses “so also” to draw out the meaning of an illustration: 1:11; 2:26; 3:5 and here. The final word says it all: dead. By itself this verse comes close to the Lutheran addition to Paul of *sola fides*. Later on we read: *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.* (James 2:24)

It may be worth noting that Luther added the word alone to his translation of Romans 3:28 to make his interpretation clear (*allein* durch den Glauben). This is not illegitimate, of course, but Paul did not use the word “alone.” Intriguingly, the only time in the Bible we read “faith alone” is here in the “right strawy letter” of James!

Verse 18 The diatribe starts with a question on the lips of a supposed interlocutor. Although this is an “objection”, it is odd because it does not really disagree with James on the importance of works. However, it is, at best, a bland intervention, as if one could have *either one or the other*. Faith, by its nature, is an interior disposition, literally unseen until made visible in some deed. The language here is quite Pauline and it may be that the writer is addressing a distorted reception of Paul’s teaching in Rom 3:21, 28; 4:6. The following verse 19 is a good reminder that pure orthodoxy is of itself inadequate.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Inevitably, we are addressed by this text. If I were arrested for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?
2. Conviction which has literally no effect whatsoever is futile. Where am I experiencing right now the call to action in my faith?
3. It can be useful to distinguish belief and faith. Belief is what I believe, expressed in doctrines. Faith is the inner disposition of trust, the movement of the heart, which must flow over into my life it is to be alive at all.

PRAYER

Faithful God, you call us to lives of trust and faithfulness. Help us to love you with our heart and soul, with our mind and strength. With the very same love, may we love our neighbour as ourselves, as Jesus taught us, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

I gave my back to those who struck me

- Is. 50:5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
- 6 I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
- 7 The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
- 8 he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
- 9 It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There is no doubt that the place of suffering in life remains one of the great enigmas and, in particular, innocent suffering. In some ways, this is the “only question” (Iris Murdoch). There is no “answer”, at least in terms of an intellectual solution. Perhaps the best we can manage is to show that, in the light of Jesus’ own engagement with unjust suffering, it is not unreasonable to continue trusting in God.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

This poem comes from Second Isaiah. The present book, actually quite unified, reflects different stages of evolution.

1-39 First Isaiah - 8th century bc
40-55 Second Isaiah - Exile
56-66 Third Isaiah - just after the Exile

Thus, Is 40-55 comes from the second half of the sixth century bc, some 150 years after Isaiah of Jerusalem. The prophet wrote while still in exile in Babylon.

KIND OF WRITING

There are four poems in Is 40-55 which have been identified by scholars as the Suffering Servant songs: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12 (cf. Jer

10:18-24; 11:19).

Who this figure is has puzzled people for a long time. It might be simply the prophet himself, who suffers for his ministry. It could also be the people as a whole, who through the suffering of Exile became again God’s servants. Both dimensions are in the texts, so it may be as well to think of the two readings together. I.e. the prophet, undergoing innocent yet transformative suffering, shows the way forward for the people as a whole.

It is almost impossible for Christian readers not to see Jesus in these readings. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but the songs did have a meaning in a particular historical context and there is a Jewish approach to these mysterious passages.

The songs and indeed Isaiah as a whole were used widely by the New Testament writers to explore the meaning of the death of Jesus. Just as one example, here is St Paul: Israel’s sins have separated her from God (e. g., Isa 59: 7- 8 and Rom 3: 15- 17; Isa 52: 5 and Rom 2: 24); God has remained faithful, preserving a remnant (Isa 1: 9 and Rom 9: 29); God brings eschatological salvation even to the Gentiles (Isa 49: 8 and 2 Cor 6: 2; Isa 65: 1 and Rom 10: 20).

In the end God will redeem Israel (Isa 45: 23 and Rom 14: 11) and his purpose will prevail (Isa 40: 13 and Rom 11: 34; 1 Cor 2: 16).

In that sense, the songs remain indispensable when we try to see how the first generation of believers came to understand the place of suffering in the life of Jesus.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Listen carefully to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears. I have indeed prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. (Job 13:17-21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 5-6 Israel had turned away from God, becoming rebellious. By contrast, the Servant is a model of faithfulness (Cf. 53:3-5, 7-8, Jer 20:1-2, 26:7-24). Part of the background may be the ritual humiliation of kings at their coronation in the ancient near east. At the same time, there is acceptance of the punishment.

Verses 7-8 Flint = adamant. Cf. Ezek 3:8-9. Against pressure, the servant grows in faithfulness. The tone is very like the book of Job when he makes a “case” against God. Yet, within the suffering, God’s help is apparent.

Verse 9 9ab = continuation of Job-like v.8 Garment: appearance v. reality, permanence v. impermanence

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The poem is an invitation to go back to a time of suffering in your own life. What happened to you during it? What became of your faith and prayer?

2. In the song of the Servant, the person praying grows in trust, a trust which is grounded in difficult experience. Is that vision true to my own experience?

PRAYER

God, be with us on the journey of life, so that when challenges come our way, we may grow in our awareness of your presence and may deepen our trust in you. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 50:5-9; Psalm 116 (114); James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Suffering Servant theme gives us the background to the suffering of the Messiah in the New Testament.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 116 (114) catches exactly the tone of the reading: *They surrounded me, the snares of death, with the anguish of the tomb; they caught me, sorrow and distress. I called on the Lord's name. O Lord, my God, deliver me!*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 50:5-9

Suffering is a huge question and unjust suffering is even harder. That is the kind of difficult experience which lies this poem / prayer we are about to hear. The early Christians were reminded of Jesus as they hear these words.

Second reading

James 2:14-18

It is tempting to think that being a person of prayer and faith is enough...but the blunt St James thinks otherwise. Unless our convictions lead to action, what use are they?

Gospel

Mark 8:27-35

Jesus asks a great question in today's Gospel...one of those questions which jumps off the page. Many of us are spontaneously, perhaps unwillingly, asking the same question today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 14 September

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Numbers 21:4-9

This reading is chosen because the Gospel refers to it. Symbolically, it presents a reality which is true to experience: when something is troubling us in any way, the solution is to face it.

Phil 2:6-11

For the feast, we read an early Christian hymn. Even though very old, it can still move us today as we reflect on all God has done for us in Jesus' death and res-

urrection.

John 3:13-17

The Gospel takes up the arresting image of the bronze serpent. It is a metaphor: Christ looked death in the face for us. The wounded healer heals the wounded.



Tuesday 15 September

Our Lady of Sorrows

1 Timothy 3:1-13

This job description of a good Christian leader is revealing: *what* was going on (even then!) that the writer needed to spell it out so?

Luke 2:33-35

As we know, even in the happy stories of Jesus' birth, the shadow of suffering and the anticipation of the cross are present.

Wednesday 16 September

Sis Cornelius and Cyprian

1 Timothy 3:14-16

Today, the writer quotes a brief early Christian hymn about Jesus. Even if the language is fairly oblique, all the essentials are there.

Luke 7:31-35

Some people can be very hard to please—a human reality which emerges clearly in this reading. Rejecting both John the Baptist and Jesus, their ingenuity is a warning for today. We too find ways around faith...

Thursday 17 September

St Robert Bellarmine

1 Timothy 4:12-16

A young person in ministry can, understandably, feel a bit daunted. Our read-

ing today offers encouragement not to lose heart.

Luke 7:36-50

The irritability of “holy” people is twice registered in this Gospel. Firstly, in the mind of the Pharisee, someone holy like Jesus ought not to allow anyone so obviously “unholy” to touch him. The parable offered is hardly rocket science!

The discussion which follows draws out the blindingly obvious. But things get worse: Jesus pronounces forgiveness, which leads to even greater “holy” consternation.

Friday 18 September

1 Timothy 6:2-12

Even in those days, believer could go off the rails, led by leaders interested only in money. Our reading, in response, is both ironic and clear.

Luke 8:1-3

Women were important in Jesus' ministry and in the very first generations. Today we get a rare view of the circle closest to Jesus, answering our very practical question of how did they all manage? With a lot of hidden help, apparently.

Saturday 19 September

1 Timothy 6:13-16

Our final excerpt from 1 Timothy is an exhortation to live a life in accordance with our convictions. The writer includes a hymn, looking forward to the final judgment and celebrating the mystery of God.

Luke 8:4-15

Today we are offered the parable of the sower and an early interpretation. Scholars of the Bible link the interpretation to the early church rather than to Jesus, because the focus is different.

In the parable, the centre is sheer, astonishing abundance. In the applied interpretation the centre is on the hearer's reaction to the word of God. We can choose to reflect on the gift or on our reception of the gift...or both!