

Presentation 5

Summary of Mk 1-3 and Mark's healing Stories



Late afternoon fishing on the Sea of Galilee

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1. Overview of Mk 1-3

Summary of Mk 1:1-15

- Mark present Jesus as the beloved one of God, the principal actor in the divine drama that is about to unfold through his career. His ministry is empowered by God's spirit. This spirit leads him to confront evil and announce the good news.
- While the prologue explicitly raises the question "Who is Jesus?" it indirectly poses a second: "Who is *with* Jesus?" From the wilderness, the desert symbol of homelessness that the gospel begins.
- From the perspective of the ancient worldview of the cosmic hierarchy, Jesus is a human being who is connected to the three spheres of existence: the human, supra-human, and sub-human. In the wilderness Jesus seeks kinship. Instead he finds "wild beasts" from the sub-human realm, possible symbols of politically oppressive powers. This search for companions, his quest for home, continues in the next scene with the call of his first disciples (1:16-20).



Dalmanutha near Capernaum on northern shore of the sea of Galilee.

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Summary of Mk 1:16-3:35

The gospel's first three chapters after the prologue herald *key themes* which will develop as the gospel story continues:

- Jesus is confirmed as God's agent through a healing ministry that makes tangible God's *basileia*;
- Jesus' passion as the cross' silhouette is subtly revealed;
- the antagonists are revealed who are hostile to Jesus and his disciples.
- The constitution of Jesus' household, its distinguishing features and how power will be exercised in it.
- Contrasts between the house and synagogue, the insider and outsider, the natural family and genuine household.
- The variety of reactions to Jesus which will flow over into the parable teaching in Mk 4 which expose the reader to another way of perceiving reality.

Heard through Mark's domestic perspective, these chapters also reveal the kind of household encountered by the gospel audience:

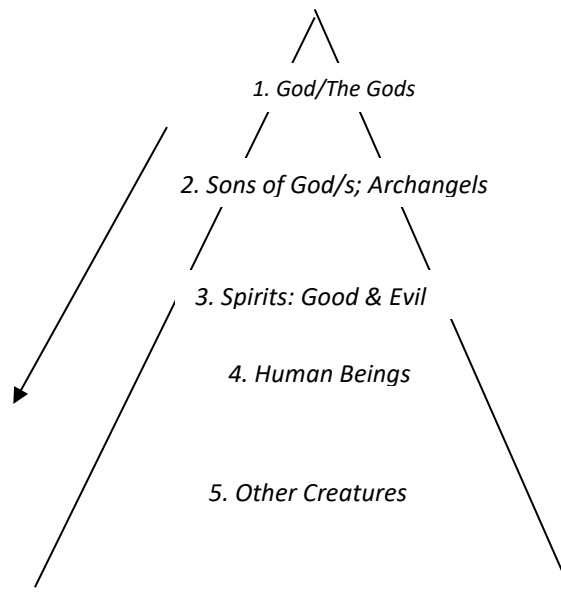
- a *domus* typical of the Greco-Roman world, large enough to embrace a huge city population. the socially reprobate find a home
- place of healing, teaching, ministry
- an urban centre in which the resurrection is tangibly experienced.
- offers an alternative domestic structure
- status, power, security and family connections are no longer the values that will determine its membership or structure its lines of authority
- a renewed Roman *domus* in which the typical *paterfamilias* is absent. The authority of Jesus acting through the household's leadership replaces him.

Because Mark presents this household as an alternative religious, economic and political system that will challenge the status quo of the Roman Empire, it will become the centre of a conflict from which neither the household nor its members will be immune. This conflict will come from outside the household. Unfortunately, it will also emerge from within.



2. *Healings in Mark's Gospel*

- Healings are key in Mark's presentation of Jesus. These are noted in Mk 1, 2 and 3. How do we understand healings from a modern point of view, from our scientific worldview.
- Mark's world is different from our own. The ancients and Mark believed in a spirit world.
- This meant that they believed that there was a spirit world which was as real to them as the physical world. These two worlds coalesced and interrelated. What happened in the spirit world affected the physical world. One determined the other. Good fortune or ill was the result of spirits. These beings saturated the air that surrounded human beings. Misfortune or ill-health was the result of evil spirits that penetrated the human body.
- The only way to be protected from these evil spirits was through the use of amulets or magic, the action of a healer or miracle worker, or through an appeal to one who had power over the evil spirit.
- Mark's Gospel audience, like all Mediterranean people, believed that the hierarchy of authority and power of the Graeco-Roman world reflected the social hierarchy of the whole cosmos. This cosmos included the supra-human, spiritual and divine beings who influenced human activity and geographical events. This social cosmic hierarchy can be illustrated as a pyramid, with the power or influence of authority descending downwards towards the world of humans and creatures beneath the human world.



- This background is necessary for understanding the activity of the spirits in the Gospel of Mark and for interpreting the many stories which presume a spirit-world.
- Sensitivity to this world ensures that we do not read Mark's world as though it were our own. It also critiques our technically based, information and computer literate age that interprets any conversation about a spirit world as irrational.

- Mark's Jesus is presented from the first chapter of the Gospel as one who is God's agent. We know that Jesus is God's beloved one who shares God's power. This scene also helps the reader to situate Jesus in the hierarchy of cosmic power. He is positioned on the second level of the pyramid, above the spirits with power over them. This power enables the demonically possessed person to be liberated and made whole.
- In Mark's frequent stories of Jesus exorcising a person possessed by an evil spirit, the spirit acknowledges Jesus' position and power in the hierarchy. For example in Mk 1:24, the unclean spirit says to Jesus: 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—The Holy One of God.'



Section of the 4th century CE Capernaum Synagogue built upon an earlier first century CE structure (synagogue?). Photo: © Michael Trainor, used with permission

- The stories of Jesus exorcising are important in Mk. They reveal a fundamental conviction of the evangelist: 'Through Jesus' ministry of exorcism, God's presence rules, overcomes evil, releases people to freedom and creates a community of disciples who experience wholeness at every level of their beings. Mark is convinced that God seeks to release people from every situation where they feel handicapped and isolated. No thing or being can prevent this—not even evil spirits. Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcising reveal God's desire for human beings be totally happy, liberated and made whole. This is the *basileia* God: God's desire for humanity and creation to be whole.
 - Brendan Byrne: 'The miracles are signs pointing to a more complete wholeness that is God's ultimate intent for humanity. They disclose God's purpose here and now, even if the full realization of that purpose must await the final arrival of the kingdom. Moreover, they are not simply acts of great kindness Jesus performed

for certain individuals “back there” (during his historical life). As told in the gospels they are “our story” as well, invitations to us to enter into the narrative, identify with the characters, and see whether the transforming power of the Risen Lord cannot also be at work within our own bodies, including our wounded, alienated, and indeed “leprous” parts.’ (*Lifting the Burden*, p. 75)

- 3 symbolic zones of human activity:
 1. Eyes/Heart → Discernment and conscience;
 2. Ears/Mouth → Self-expression and articulate religious identity;
 3. Hands/Limbs → Purposeful action and agency.
- Denis Edwards: ‘In Rahner’s theological understanding, a miracle occurs when a person experiences God’s self-communication in a particular configuration of events, in such a way that God’s self-communication participates immediately in the event. God is experienced with a kind of immediacy, in and through the event. A miracle is a call of God in and through specific events that calls us to wonder. In such a miraculous event, God’s self-communication comes to appearance and witnesses to itself.’ (*How God Acts*, pp. 87-88)



4th century CE Capernaum Synagogue. Photo: © Michael Trainor, used with permission

3. Summary

- Mk 1-3 presents Jesus as God’s agent and healer.
- Mark presumes a spirit world, a social cosmic hierarchy and Jesus’ placement as ‘God’s Son’ with power in this hierarchy.
- The symbolic zones of healing allow us to understand the theological meaning of the healing event as the expression of God’s *Basileia*.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION & CONVERSATION

- What do you understand a miracle to be? How does this presentation help to expand and offer a different or deeper appreciation of miracles and healings?
- What do you think in our world and local religious 'households' need healing? Why?

IN PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT PRESENTATION

- For the next presentation, read Mk 4-6.

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