

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: January 13th: Mark 8.27-Mark 9.1 Some Notes

Once again, a lot packed into a short space. This is the mid point and, arguably, the turning point, of Mark's Gospel. Jesus takes his disciples the furthest North they have been to non-Jewish territory and to a place originally names after Baal, and the celebrated as the birthplace of the Nature God Pan, and currently dominated by an Emperor as "god" temple. Philip's territory, not Herod's territory. Jesus asks his disciples what they have learnt, and then takes them deep into the real meaning of what they have learnt – a process which actually meant a lot of un-learning for them. I rather like the sort of parallel which takes the captain of a football team who has built the team up with minor victories saying to the team on the eve of their biggest match: Right, you've sussed out that I'm the best captain ever, and you're the greatest team ever.... and tomorrow I'm going to get killed in the match, and you're going to get beaten ten – nil, and probably also die not long after. BUT Victory is certain!

We just have the Old Testament as background, but the disciples had the in-between-Testaments apocalyptic literature. For them, the Messiah had tended to shift on (after centuries of subjugation by foreign empires) from a new King David leading a military revolt to God himself taking over and making the Jews top dogs again: universal destruction followed by universal peace and a restored Jerusalem the centre of the world. We don't know how far individual disciples had the David ideal uppermost or the God in action uppermost, but their spokesman Peter certainly wasn't thinking of public execution when he said "Messiah". We also need to remember that the disciples had probably seen the corpses of would-be revolutionaries. "Take up your cross" doesn't sound a great recruitment selling point to us. To the first disciples, it meant what it really was.

It is worth dwelling on what all this means to us as disciples. 1) We are maybe half-inclined to sell out to the notion that Jesus was a decent sort of guy with some good ideas on social reform and personal relationships... forget the weird religious stuff. 2) We are maybe half-inclined to sell out to the notion that being a Christian is a matter of being a decent citizen who fits in and keeps the God stuff to him/herself. Personally, I'm not really with the "Christians" who make themselves extremely unpopular outside schools or pregnancy termination clinics because they disagree profoundly with various current "norms", but I have to admire their faith-based courage. Let's say the local Council insists on dropping Christ from Christmas and prayers from public life and actually encourages adolescent sexual activity. Am I going to join a protest, or just shrug and agree that all these things are a matter of personal choice.

The hermit Telemachus went into the arena in "Christian" Rome to protest against gladiator death fights; and was killed. His death stopped the combats – so impressed was the very crowd that had howled for the old man to be removed.

Witness is, of course, often much less dramatic and much less dangerous/costly. However, it can still be difficult to refuse to laugh at the rude or unkind joke, or to play the unkind trick, or to condemn conduct that everyone else seems to think is just fine. I admired the local MP who rebuked a hostile audience which wanted to shout down the mother of someone with mental health problems during a debate about the Secure Unit at Bethlem Hospital. Sticking to principle can lose popularity.

A footnote: The tail end of this passage is almost certainly not about Jesus telling the disciples that some of them would see the Second Coming. When Mark wrote his Gospel, the early Christians were already seeing the Christian Faith spread far beyond the 120 miles by 40 miles of Palestine. Specifically, there were Christian (Gentile as well as Jewish) communities in Rome, the capital of the Empire.