BINDING THE STRONG MAN

A POLITICAL READING OF MARK'S STORY OF JESUS

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An Abridged Version of

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A Political Reading of the Gospel According to Mark

By Ched Myers

FOREWORD by Daniel Berrigan

Long before publication, this work by Ched Myers accreted a remarkable history. West cost to East, section-by-section, revised repeatedly, the manuscript made its way. Here indeed, we agreed, was a scriptural study to reckon with. It invited (and shortly received) serious pursuit: reading, meditation, passionate discussion. Those of us who were lucky enough to come on the Myers manuscript saw our lives being honoured and beckoned. For some time, we (like Myers’ Mark: indeed like Mark’s Jesus) had been testing our mettle on strenuous terrains. Many of us who gathered for retreats and study, a current version of Binding the Strongman in hand, were incurring the wrath of the titular gods, those daemons who guard the impassable borders of empire, the multicorporate lairs and nuclear sanctuaries. Such Christians, coming together to catch breath and pray and reconnoitre tend to regard ourselves as a species of occupied people, striving to free ourselves from the yoke and lash of culture. And then, through Myers, we met the early Christian community of Mark.

Our need could be though of under a double image. A map that would point us, straight as an arrow, in the direction of sources. Important beyond words, the need to know, vividly, concretely, where we came from, what communities had lives the gospels in fair weather and foul, from the beginning. And then another image. We needed a handbook brimming with encouragement: stories, instruction, discipline, reproof, irony, hope, valiance in the breach; we needed the beckoning hand – out of another time and place (but not really another) – of Someone to be trusted. Someone to indicate the way to go. The Myers manuscript, meticulous in scholarship and daring in scope, landed among us. And things have never been quite the same.

Myers took chances, dared to be passionate or indignant, or ironic or loving. He renewed the sap of the text, the zest, the risky start, the hope of finishing. He drew the text into life, our lives – where indeed the text was meant to lodge, to discomfort, to ennoble. Let it be said that through Myers we know our task better and will perhaps set about it more resolutely. For hope renewed, for “beauty and valour and act”, this word of gratitude.
1. IN WORD AND DEED

“Is this not the reason why you err, because you understand neither the scriptures nor the power of God?”
(Mark 12:24)

“Interpretation”, literary critic Frederic Johnson once observed, “is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretative options are either openly or implicitly in conflict.” This is certainly the case with biblical interpretation. In the Church today, a crucial ‘battle for the Bible’ is under way. It is not, however, to be defined by the old ‘liberal vs fundamentalist’ debate. It concerns how scripture will be used in the Church in its struggle to decide where and how to stand in a world of epidemic violence and oppression.

It is not enough to simply appeal to the Bible’s ‘authority’. There are self-proclaimed ‘Bible-believing’ Christians who are convinced that Reagan’s* military and foreign policies reflect divine imperatives. And there are other Christians who invoke the biblical mandates to provide sanctuary to fleeing refugees or beat swords into ploughshares in their protest against the very same policies. ‘Authority’ is nothing more nor less than how we read the Bible, and then what we do with what we read. Authority is about interpretation and practice.

It is said that Karl Barth consulted two things each morning: the Bible and the newspaper. Interpretation of the Word must preserve a fundamental accountability to the world. This study endeavours to respond to this double responsibility. It acknowledges the difficult issues involved in interpreting the ancient story and gives priority to understanding the text first in its own literary and socio-cultural context. At the same time, with an eye firmly fixed in the social, political and economic issues facing us in our world, these studies will take a firm stand on the “interpretive battlefield”.

As the very first account of Jesus of Nazareth, Mark stands at the centre of both historical and theological investigation. Throughout much of the 20th century, however, most NT critics considered him theologically ‘primitive’. The dominant schools of ‘form’ and ‘redaction’ analysis believed the text could be dissected in order to ascertain the earliest traditions about Jesus. Concern to distinguish the allegedly ‘authentic’ sayings and events of the ‘Jesus of history’ meant that critics tended to look through the text rather than at it.

Fortunately, despite academia, conventional Christian wisdom continued to assume, out of respect for the scriptures, that the whole gospel should be taken seriously. However, while a gospel should not be treated as an archeological dig, neither are they intended as biographies in any strict sense. Centuries of comparative study of the four gospels have shown that they neither can nor should be harmonised; each is a distinct, purposeful portrait of Jesus Christ. Each evangelist had a creative hand in adapting and arranging his sources according to the concerns facing the writer’s audience – just as any preacher should.

It was Mark who invented the gospel form, a dramatic presentation of Jesus’ ministry in carefully composed episodes. Like any good storyteller, Mark used the literary devices of plot, crisis, characteris-
ation and setting to structure his account and to draw his readers into its pathos. In order to respect the whole narrative, then, it is now widely accepted that Mark should be appraised with the tools of literary analysis. If we wish to discover what the author meant to say about Jesus, we must understand his ‘narrative strategy’, that is, attend not only to what Mark tells us, but also how he tells it.

Why, for example, does Mark’s gospel begin and end with reference to Galilee, as opposed, say, to Luke’s account, which begins and ends in Jerusalem. Why does Mark choose to narrate several important events twice? Why are the scribes always portrayed as the arch-opponents of Jesus? Why do boat trips across the Sea of Galilee figure so prominently in the first half of the story, only to disappear in the second? And why does Mark, alone among the evangelists, decline to narrate an appearance by the resurrected Jesus, something so troubling to later readers that several apocryphal endings were added?

**Mark’s Narrative Strategy** tells us a great deal about how he understood Jesus’ message and practice to relate to his own social and historical context. This is because ‘story line’ always reflects ‘world-view’. We observe this every day in the media, which are always ‘reporting’ the world to us in the shape of stories. The media’s stories, too, are the result of a highly selective – and ideological – editorial process. Why is a relatively minor sports event given time on the evening news when a major demonstration against US intervention in Central America goes unreported? Further, the stories we do get have already been carefully shaped, with an “angle” for the media producer and a “catch” for the media consumer (note: quite apart from actual propaganda and government “spin”).

The point is not to denigrate the integrity of the ancient gospel account by comparing it to the disinformation mills of modern media. But it is to recognise, with sociologists of culture, that human communication revolves around narrative forms (from literature to song to campaign speech or advertisement), and these in turn interpret the social formation from which they emerge. And every story, regardless of its own claims to be fictional or factual, has a social function in relation to the prevailing ideologies, authority structures, and economic mechanisms of that formation. A given narrative will tend either to legitimate or subvert the dominant ideological assumptions. It might reinforce particular social patterns by glorifying them (e.g. Sylvester Stallone’s series of boxer-soldier-cop-hero films), or by simply accepting them into the story-scape without question (most popular romance novels). Or it may challenge these assumptions by criticising or ridiculing key social policies or symbols (as in the South African play *Waza Albert!*), or by imagining an alternative world. This is why every group, including in the United States, endeavours to censor certain narratives and promote others. Jameson refers to this as “narrative as a socially symbolic act”.

If we wish to understand the significance of the gospel story for its world – and ours – we must examine the social function of its narrative strategy. And the same tools we use for reading Mark will be equally relevant to our reading of the newspaper. As we must strive to interpret Mark’s symbolic use of bread and boat trips, so must we interpret the fictions of contemporary propaganda. What does Jesus mean by inviting disciples to “take up the cross” and what does The President mean by claiming that “America is back walking tall”?

To give due place to narrative structure and symbolism in no way takes away from the gospel’s historical character. History is itself only one kind of narrative, and it too always has a popular social function as can be seen in any school history textbook. Why is the story of the pilgrim settlements more important than that of Native American culture? Where are the sections on black or labour history? And what about the contemporary struggle over how to depict the Vietnam war?

The Gospel of Mark is both a product and a reflection of an historical era far removed from our own. We must always seek to understand the gospel first within its own socio-cultural context, with
particular attention to idiomatic expressions of “social discourse”. In our culture consider headlines such as “White House warns Reds Over Star Wars” or the commercial jingle “Coke Is It”. These metaphors are as immediately intelligible to us as they may be mysterious to foreigners, who may understand the words but not the social meaning (or “grip”). Journalistic sensationalism and consumer seduction are common forms of social discourse to us, as are ceremonial chants or totems to other societies.

In Mark we encounter the idiomatic expressions of 1st century Mediterranean social discourse. (I agree with those who place the writing of Mark in northern Palestine in the late years of the Jewish revolt just before the fall of the Temple in 70CE). The single most important aspect of social discourse at this time was the utter lack of distinction between the spiritual and socio-political realms. It is simply historical nonsense to argue that Jesus’ disputes were “religious” and not “political” or to describe his social world as a “theocracy” (as is commonly done).

Palestine was ruled not by God but by the complex condominium of Roman military-colonial bureaucracy and collaborating native Jewish aristocracy, each with their respective legitimating theologies. Church and State distinctions are part of modern dogma and as such are highly suspect. As anthropologist Mary Douglas is fond of saying, societies that think they are secularizing the highest (most sacred) institutions only end up sacralising the secular, hence the religious tone of political dialogue in the USA.

We cannot hope to appreciate the social functions of Mark’s story about Jesus’ healing of a leper (1:40ff) without some grasp of the complex system of ritual purity regulations in Jewish culture at that time. Neither can we appreciate Jesus’ parable about tenant farmers and absentee landlords (12:1f) without some idea of the social fabric of agrarian Palestine, or Jesus’ lament over poor widows who were exploited by the profiteering of a scribal establishment (12:38f) without understanding the political economy of late second-Temple-era Judaism.

Bible Reading is, then, something of a “cross-cultural” endeavour, and as such it is hard work. Yet, at the same time, we come to these stories believing that they speak powerfully and authoritatively to our social context as well. This gives both urgency and excitement to the labour of interpreting Scripture.

A “socio-literary” interpretation, upon which the following studies of Mark are based, reads the gospel as a whole and assumes that there is nothing in the narrative that Mark did not include for a specific reason (much of which later evangelists, for different reasons, omitted). It focuses both upon the author’s stories (content) and story lines (form) and pays close attention to all the devices used to present the “theatre” of the drama. These are examined for their meaning and function in Mark’s social world, and then in ours.

Mark was written as a manifesto for radical Christian discipleship, and, I believe, remains one today. In contrast to other writings of its time, it is a story about and for the poor and the common folk. Its narrative strategy is clearly subversive of the social status quo of Roman Palestine. Mark’s Jesus – through symbolic action, word and deed – systematically challenges the dominant order, with its assumptions about power and piety, sacred space, and social class. This Jesus forges a model of new social possibilities, in which the socially disenfranchised are welcomed to table; and Jew and Gentile struggle to overcome the powerful ideologies of enmity between them.

The structure around which Mark builds this narrative is the ever-present dramatic tension of a double plot. One plot is the impending showdown between Jesus and his Kingdom and the authorities and their cross. The other is the deepening misunderstanding of Jesus’ Way even by his closest followers. These ploys converge tragically when Jesus’ disciples abandon him at the very moment the authorities seize him (14:50). It is part of Mark’s literary genius that in the course of the narrative the reader is compelled to identify with the disciples in their crisis and tragedy, as we shall see. With them we struggle.
to understand the meaning of Jesus’ word and deed. Will we, as readers, allow this Jesus to challenge the dominant social ideologies that condition us in our world? And, most importantly, will we enlist into that terrible journey to “Jerusalem”?

Mark 1: 1-11

(i.) Mark opens his account of Jesus with a shocking manipulation of social discourse familiar to his audience. He titles his work a ‘gospel’ (1:1). It was characteristics for ancient writers to establish their ideological credentials by appealing to a recognisable authority at the outset of their work. This Matthew, in good Jewish fashion, appeals to a genealogy (1) while Luke, the Hellenistic historiographer, acknowledges his benefactor (1:1-4).

But what was ‘gospel’?

The term, meaning literally “glad tidings”, is so thoroughly religious to us now; but for Mark and his readers it was a wholly secular term most commonly associated with Roman propagandising. The imperial image was promoted among the far-flung provinces through a highly developed rhetorical tradition that wove together allegory and archetype with contemporary events and personalities. This included the eulogising to Caesar as the ‘divine man’ so well documented by the coins of the period and the later emperor-cults of Asia Minor.

By calling his story of the anointed man Jesus a gospel, Mark side-sweeps the authority of Rome by expropriating the Empire’s vehicle of propagation for his own, quite non-imperial, ‘good news’.

(ii.) Then, as the curtain rises upon the first act, we hear a voice from offstage reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the true legitimating authority (1:2). By anchoring his story in this prophetic voice, Mark implies that what is about to follow is a continuation of the salvation history narrated by Isaiah.

This was a bold claim, coming at a time when most Jews believed that the prophetic voices of Israel had fallen silent forever. No, booms the voice, a new way is about to be constructed. The language calls to mind the journey of the people of God toward liberation (Ex 23:20), and ‘Way’ will become in the story synonymous with the vocation of discipleship. Immediately there is dramatic tension. Something is about to happen. But what or, more importantly, where?

Mark’s citation is in fact a quite conscious conflation of prophetic texts. The first part (1:2) is not Isaiah at all, but, rather, a paraphrase of Malachi’s warning of the apocalyptic advent of God (Mal 3:1).

Conspicuously omitted, however, is Malachi’s claim that this epiphany will take place “in the temple.” Where, then, will this great event take place? Now comes an almost literal quotation (Isaiah 40:3): the messenger will appear “in the wilderness” (1:3).

Wilderness, or desert, had many connotations for Mark’s readers. Literally it was a place of uninhabited desolation; symbolically, the refuge of the people of God in flight (Exodus and apocalyptic literature); geographically, a place in which contemporary resistance movements were spawned. The point is this: Mark could not have chosen a ‘co-ordinate’ further removed from Malachi’s temple. By his omission, he has implied a tension between two archetypically opposite symbolic spaces, a tension which will shortly become explicit.

The First Act opens with the introduction of John the Baptistiser, who appears preaching repentance in the wilderness (1:4-6). John’s clothing is a good example of social discourse: Mark’s audience would immediately have thought of Elijah. Mark uses John-as-Elijah to build upon the tensions he has just introduced. What was the last prophetic cry before the prophetic voices fell silent? It was Malachi’s
promise “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes (Mal. 4:5). The tension of expectation builds. Who was Elijah? The great prophet who went head-to-head with the powerful, as John will with Herod later in the story. Political tension is introduced.

In 1:5 Mark reports – with characteristic Semitic hyperbole – that “all of Judea and Jerusalem” came out to John in the wilderness (1:5). Here the spatial tension (wilderness vs temple) becomes manifest. According to the dominant ideology of Judaism, Jerusalem was considered the centre of the world to which all the peoples of the world would sooner or later come to worship (see Psalm 69:35; Is. 60:10-14). But for Mark the circulation of salvation history is reversed. The prophetic word is being regenerated not in Zion but at the margins!

This is another wry side-sweep, this time at the Jewish ruling elite. The priestly establishment, who controlled the mechanisms of social redemption from their power-base in the Jerusalem temple, would necessarily take strong exception to this ‘wilderness revival.’

All these tensions are deepened in the second act in which Jesus from ‘Nazareth, in Galilee’ appears onstage (1.9). Mark must have been fully aware that by introducing the main character in this fashion was tantamount to saying “Jesus from Nowheresville.” There is no attestation to the small village of Nazareth in any other ancient source. Nazareth is entirely unremarkable.

On the other hand, Galilee, a province in northern Palestine, was notorious to good Jews. It was considered ‘unclean’ since it was surrounded by Hellenistic cities, populated by every sort of Gentile, and geographically cut off from Judea by Samaria. Yet it is to an obscure Nazarene, of suspect social origin, that the Divine Voice will now speak – not in the temple but in the demon-infested wilderness.

To the account of Jesus; baptism, the story is suddenly invaded by apocalyptic imagery. Jesus rises from Jordan’s waters to a vision of the heavens torn apart by a mysterious voice, and he is then driven further into the wilderness for a confrontation with Satan and the angels (1:10-13). Is this the ‘day of the Lord’ for which the prophets yearned? (cf. Is.64:1) Where, then, are the “new heavens and the new earth”? In Mark’s time, apocalyptic symbolism was the popular social discourse of political dissent. Its mythic narrative heralded the “fall of the powers” as an end, not to the physical universe but to the order of oppression. Throughout the gospel – especially in the presentation of Jesus as ‘the Son of Man’, Mark draws heavily upon the apocalyptic stock of Daniel, a manifesto of resistance to Hellenist imperialism written two centuries before.

Mark’s insertion of apocalyptic symbolics here gives a real ‘political’ dimension to Jesus’ baptism. In this ritual of new birth, Jesus is declared radically free of the social obligations as defined by the dominant order. Jesus becomes, so to speak, an “outlaw”; he will indeed shortly begin challenging the structures of law and order around him.

This subversive edge is sharpened by Mark’s transition in 1:14. We read that Jesus takes up John’s preaching of repentance after John was arrested. This tale of political intrigue, however, Mark suspends for later in the story.

Mark 1:12 - 20

Events Have Unfolded in rapid sequence in these opening verses of the gospel. Isaiah announced the arrival of a messenger, and John appeared; John announced the arrival of a “stronger one” (1:18), and Jesus appeared. (NOTE: Jesus appeared and God speaks). Now, in 1:15, Jesus announces the arrival of the critical moment of the Kingdom. This narrative strategy builds in the reader a sense of being on the verge of something momentous. The world is about to end!
What happens in the next scene is thus exceedingly anticlimactic. Jesus simply bids some common labourers to accompany him on a mission (1:15ff). Yet Mark’s “call” stories in fact narrate the concrete clash between the old order and the invasion of the new. Here the Teacher is shown as choosing his students, a reversal of the normal practice of rabbinic recruitment in Mark’s day. Jesus encounters people at their workplaces – a family fishing business (1:17, 19), a toll collection office (2:14) – yet he calls them to abandon their trades. Such a demand, in antiquity, would have entailed more than a loss of economic security, but a rupture in the social fabric as well, since the world of the extended family centered around the means of livelihood.

The call to discipleship is an uncompromising break with “business as usual.” The Kingdom demands not just an assent of the heart, but a radical re-ordering of all socio-economic relations.

These fishermen are then called to be “fishers of men” (1:17), a notoriously misunderstood metaphor in the evangelical tradition. The image is taken from Jeremiah 16:16 as a symbol of God’s censure of Israel. Elsewhere it is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and powerful (Ezekiel 29:4). Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus invites these common folk to join him in overturning the structures of power and privilege in the world. The world is being turned upside down – including our own personal universes. The Kingdom has dawned, and it is associated with the adventure of discipleship.

Mark 1:21

The Tone of the Narrative so far makes confrontation inevitable, and it erupts in act 4. Jesus inaugurates his public ministry with a dramatic exorcism in a Capernaum synagogue (1:21ff). Here we encounter, for the first time, a “miracle story.”

The manipulation (?) of either the physical or spirit world is not the central point of these stories; it is what these acts symbolise that is most important. Mark goes to great lengths to discourage us from seeing Jesus as a popular ‘magician’. Not only does Jesus constantly discourage people from dwelling on the act of healing or exorcism in themselves, he actually exhorts his disciples (and therefore the reader) to look into the deeper meaning of his symbolic actions (cf. 1:44; 3:12; 18:43; 7:36 and 8:17-21).

In 1:21 Mark is again employing the symbolic use of space. Jesus has suddenly gone from the margins to the heart of the provincial Jewish social order: a Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath. Immediately identified with this space is a plot conflict which will become central to the entire story: the struggle between Jesus and the scribal Establishment. The exorcism story proper is framed (1:21-27) by the report of the amazement of the crowd that Jesus possesses an authority “unlike that of the scribes.”

No sooner has Jesus set foot on the scribes’ turf than he is confronted by a man with an “unclean spirit” (1:23). The demon challenges Jesus (1:24) with the protest of someone anticipating invasion by a hostile force: ‘Why do you meddle with us?’ (See Judges 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18). However, the demon’s defiance quickly turns to fear: “Have you come to destroy us?” Upon whose behalf is the demon speaking? Could he be the voice of the very scribal aristocracy whose ‘space’ – its social role and power – Jesus is threatening?

At first glance, such an interpretation may seem far-fetched – until we examine the only other episode in the gospel in which Jesus converses directly with a demon. This exorcism episode takes place in an entirely different symbolic context, but exhibits striking parallels to the synagogue story. A little later, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory for the first time (4:35; 5:1). Again, just as Jesus sets foot on this ‘foreign’ turf, Jesus is confronted by a man with an “unclean spirit”, who also challenges his mission (5:2ff).
This latter story is much more elaborate including its symbolic inferences. The setting itself is designed to suggest to the Jews all that is prototypically “unclean”. The Decapolis (“Ten Cities”), one of the eastern frontiers of the Empire, was strongly pagan. The cemetery environment (the madman dwells “among the tombs”), and the subsequent role of the herd of pigs, reeks of impurity (cf Is.65:4). The demon’s protest is directly symmetrical to the synagogue encounter (5:7). This time, however, Jesus is addressed not with the Semitic title “holy one of God”, but the Hellenistic “son of the Most High God.”

The clue to the social symbolism of the story of the Gerasene demoniac is its recurring military terminology. The powerful demonic horde identifies itself to Jesus as “Legion”, a Latin word which had only one meaning in Mark’s social formation: a division of Roman soldiers. Jesus drives “Legion” into a “herd” of pigs (5:1). This term – inappropriate for pigs who do not travel in herds – was sometimes used to refer to a band of military recruits. Jesus’ command, “he gave them leave”, is a military order, and the word describing the pigs’ rush into the lake connotes troops charging into battle (5:13).

Enemy soldiers being swallowed in the sea of course brings to mind the Exodus 14 narrative. It can hardly be incidental that the number of swine drowned, “about 2,000, corresponds to the number of soldiers in a Roman legion. Finally, when we read that Legion is so powerful no one can restrain him (5:4), “begged him (Jesus) earnestly not to send him out of the district”, the conclusion is irresistible that this is a symbolic representation of the Roman military occupation of Palestine.

These Two Exorcisms represent a dramatization of the “inaugural challenge” posed by the Kingdom to the Powers. To interpret them solely as isolated acts of curing epileptics is to miss the profound socio-political impact of story-as-symbolic-discourse. The demons personify – quite credibly as far as the ancient mind was concerned – Jewish scribal and Roman imperial power, respectively. They concretely perceive Jesus as challenging their continued hegemony.

In Mark’s narrative strategy, once this demon has been symbolically vanquished by exorcism, Jesus is free to begin his compassionate ministry to the masses. Upon leaving the synagogue, Jesus attends to healing the Jewish crowds (1:29ff); and he does the same for the Gentiles the next time he crosses the sea of Galilee back to their turf (6:53ff). Oppression has been unmasked, and liberation announced.

Most Hellenistic miracle traditions originated from the upper classes and thus stressed the role of divination in the maintenance of the status quo (think of Delphi – or the Sybil). In contrast, the gospels reflect a perspective of social dispossession on which charismatic miracles assert the possibility of a radical change in the ordering of power. We see this symbolic aspect in every case of healing and exorcism in Mark.

Throughout the opening acts of his story, Mark has upset his readers’ expectations by subverting their social discourse and challenging reocgnised authority structures through dramatic action. His narrative functions to undermine the symbolic equilibrium of the dominant social order, in order to clear space for a new world to break in. This new order, as we shall see, is embodied in the alternative practice of Jesus and his community.

Thus does Mark begin the gospel’s bold challenge to the ideological strongholds of Roman Palestine – and Imperial America.

BINDING THE STRONGMAN
“No one can break into a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless the strong man is himself first bound; then his house may be plundered.” (3:27)

We have seen from Mark’s ‘prologue’ that the advent of the ‘Good News’ shakes the foundations of life as usual (1:1-15). The ‘day of the Lord’ portended by the coming of Elijah, has dawned not by cataclysm, but in the practice of Jesus of Nazareth, who calls very ordinary people to join him in challenging the social (NOTE: and ecclesiastical) order (1:15-28). Mark now turns to sketch a portrait of Jesus’ public ministry in and around the Galilean city of Capernaum. This first major narrative begins (1:16f) and ends by the shores of the Sea of Galilee (4:1). It articulates the character of the Messianic mission: healing and exorcism, proclamation and confrontation.

Having served notice to the scribal establishment that its authority is being questioned (1:21-28), Jesus begins his mission to the poor (1:29-34). Almost immediately, however, he encounters opposition from these same scribes (2:6). Indeed, hostility from the local public authorities builds throughout this section into a double climax of polarisation. In the wake of his dramatic public healing in defiance of Sabbath law (3:1-5), provincial officials begin plotting Jesus’ demise (3:6). Meanwhile a government investigation is launched (3:22-30), causing even Jesus’ own family to withdraw their support for his mission (3:21,31f).

The Narrative Presents the modern reader with a dilemma, for we must explain why it is that Jesus engenders so much opposition. It cannot be attributed to political intolerance of miracle workers, since healers and magicians abounded and practised freely in Hellenistic Jewish society. Nor are the authorities, at this point, raising the issue of Jesus’ alleged political claims (Messiahship). Besides, Jesus strenuously suppresses speculation about his identity (1:25, 34; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36). It must be that there is more to these healing and exorcism stories than is immediately obvious to us. In Word and Deed, I suggested that Jesus’ exorcisms were portrayed by Mark as a kind of symbolic action which articulated his confrontation with the dominant social order. This is equally true of his healings.

Again we must remember the cross-cultural dimensions of reading biblical narrative. We tend to assume that the healing stories speak of the miraculous cure of physical pathologies, because in our modern worldview illness is equated with biological disorders (in medical anthropology this is called a bio-medical definition of illness). The ancient world, however, perceived illness primarily as a “socially disvalued” state (an ethno-medical definition) – that is, an aberrant condition that threatened communal integrity.

What the biblical writers call ‘leprosy’ cannot be identified with what we know (bio-medically) as Hansen’s disease. Their concern was not scientific diagnosis of symptoms but the determination of social abnormalities requiring quarantine. In the cultural system of Judaism, these were associated with impurity or sin. From the ethno-medical perspective, then, “healing” was a matter first and foremost of “re-socialising” the anomalous person. Hence the rituals associated with the cleansing of leprosy (Lev. 13-14).

We shall see that in every major healing episode in Mark, Jesus seeks to restore the personal and social wholeness denied to the sick by a socio-cultural system which marginalises them. His healing acts are symbolic actions directed as much at the system as the individual. Obviously, to understand the power of this action we must know something about these cultural systems and how they functioned in the social world presumed in Mark’s story.

The image of a young man burning a draft card outside the White House in 1969 might seem an innocuous act of petty arson to a socio-cultural “outsider”. But the symbolic discourse of such an action becomes far more significant once the historical context is understood. This context includes the social
‘codes’ (draft laws), ‘sites’ (the president’s residence as commander-in-chief and official instigator of foreign policy), and ‘groups’ (anti-war protesters vs architects of the military-industrial complex and ‘first strike’). Jesus’ actions provoke political opposition precisely because they systematically challenge the social codes, sites, and groups which ordered life and meaning in Palestinian Judaism during the late second Temple period. It is crucial to remind ourselves again that there was no differentiation between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ in antiquity. Torah (the Mosaic law), to us a(n) (obsolete) religious text, functioned then as the fundamental and everyday working legal code. So when Jesus engages in a debate concerning scripture, he is involved in the most blatant kind of social criticism. Similarly when he challenges Temple cultus, he is subverting the very centre and heart of (both) political (and religious) authority – Jewish national identity. He is threatening those whose social status is bound to the Temple-State. When he clashes with priest and scribe, he is taking on the most dominant (and powerful) ideology (as well as all the ingrained and vested interests that go along with such).

If We Keep This in Mind, we can see Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ Capernaum ministry as one of “direct action”. We pick up the story with the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law in the privacy of the family home (1:30f). Jesus commences his public ministry of healing only after the sun has set (at the conclusion of the Sabbath, 1:32), implying that there is something controversial about what he has just done behind closed doors. This does not become fully clear until the first climax of the campaign in which Jesus openly heals a man in a synagogue on the Sabbath – with dire consequences (3:1-6).

From the outset, Jesus the healer experiences the incessant press of the needy masses, as indicated in the summary statement in 1:32-39. This accurately reflects the social reality of Mark’s time. Economic and political circumstances in the decade prior to the upheavals of the Jewish-Roman war had dispossessed significant portions of the Palestinian population. Illness and disability were an inescapable part of the cycle of poverty for the peasantry, as it still is today. In Mark, Jesus’ special attention to the “crowd” (mentioned some 38 times) articulates an emphatic bias toward the poor.

Jesus withdraws for solitude (1:35), establishing a narrative rhythm of action and reflection (see 6:31). There is a triple refrain in the first half of the story in which Jesus retreats from synagogue hostility to safety (1:29; 3:7; 6:6f). It has been suggested that Mark’s portrayal of the “home” as a positive site (5:38; 7:24; 9:33; 10:10; 14:3) over against synagogue and Temple (always sites of conflict) may reflect the experience of the early Church, whose symbolic centre was not an institutional cultus but the commonlife.

**Mark 1: 30 – 2:22**

Mark now narrates a series of symbolic actions in which Jesus attacks the most basic pillars of the prevailing social order. He begins with the purity and debt codes (1:40-2:12), two mutually reinforcing cultural systems based on the Temple cultus of sacrifice and atonement, under the jurisdiction of the priestly and scribal classes. The debt (or sin) code regulated social obligation and behaviour (the Ten Commandments), while the purity code, with its definitions of “clean and unclean”, established and policed group boundaries within the body politic.

The leper represented the archetypal social outcast due to impurity. The extensive Levitical regulations regarding leprosy stipulated that the contagion was communicable and that a priest must preside over ritual cleansing. Both principles are challenged by Jesus in this episode, which revolves around the key verb “to declare” clean.

By responding to the leper’s request, Jesus is assuming the priestly prerogative. But rather than a ritual, Jesus simply touches the leper. According to the purity code, Jesus would thus contract the impurity; instead the leper is pronounced clean (1:42). The cultural system is thus subverted and social contact with the unclean affirmed (later we find Jesus accepting the hospitality of a leper, 14:3). The aftermath is the key to the story. Jesus is indignant (1:43) and dispatches the man to the priests. His task,
however, is not to publicise a miracle but to confront an ideological system (1:44). Cooperation with the Mosaic ritual is for the purpose of “witnessing against them,” a technical phrase (1 in Mark for confronting one’s opponents (see 6:11; 13:9), suggesting a protest against the whole purity apparatus under priestly control. The mission, however, aborts: the leper goes public and Jesus is forced to lie low. He must “avoid the cities” (1:45) – he is now a marked man due to his social contact with the leper (note: and ‘cocking a snoot’ at the priests). This sets the tone for Jesus’ campaign: his acts of healing will be interpreted either as liberation or lawless defiance, depending on one’s commitment to the prevailing socio-cultural order.

Jesus Returns Quietly to Capernaum but is soon discovered; he is now hounded by both the sick and the suspicious (2:1f). As in 1:22, Mark posits an essential opposition between the ‘teaching’ of Jesus (2:2,7) and the “reasoning” of the scribes (2:6,8). And, as with the leper, his healing act raises a deeper ideological issue, this time regarding the debt code. According to this code, the physically disabled were excluded from full status in the community because of their ‘imperfection’, believed to be the result of some sin in their family line. Rather than simply curing the man, Jesus chooses to challenge the system by granting forgiveness (release from debt) by which the man’s social status is fully restored regardless of his physical state (2:5,7).

The scribes object, claiming that only God can adjudicate release from sin (2:7). This is not, however, a defense of Yahweh’s sovereignty but of their own social power since, as the interpreters of Torah, they in fact control the determination of indebtedness. This role, as in the case of the priests earlier, is specifically expropriated by “the Son of Man” (2:10). Daniel’s apocalyptic metaphor for the true adjudicator of the justice of God (Dan. 7:31). The healing has a double result: the man “takes up his bed and walks”, his personhood reinstated (2:9-12), the crowd worships God, the collective “body” restored to wholeness (2:12).

Having undermined the ideological hegemony of priest and scribe, Jesus next turns to confront a social group whose power and influence were rapidly ascending in Mark’s time. The sect of the Pharisees attempted to extend the purity and debt codes to the masses through a programme of popular piety. Indeed, after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, they emerged as the dominant group within synagogue Judaism. In the next three episodes, Jesus addresses the central tenets of the Pharisaic practice: table fellowship, public piety, and Sabbath observance.

By way of narrative transition, Jesus retires to the sea for the call of Levi, who represents yet another stratum of the socially disenfranchised (2:13f). Though not poor, toll-collectors were despised as dishonest bureaucrats and representatives of an oppressive colonial administration. Yet they too are called to discipleship and welcomed into Jesus’ community.

The shared meal represented the heart of social discourse. The pharisees object because the dietary, legal and ritual issues surrounding table fellowship were their main preoccupation (2:16). Indeed, this brief clash anticipates a more lengthy one later on (7:1-5), in which Mark repudiates not only kosher practice (7:14,23), but the whole basis of Pharisaic authority (7:6-13). We shall see that this debate ultimately concerns Mark’s vision of a new social order in which Jew and Gentile are no longer segregated. Here, however, the issue is one of “holiness” as a pretext for social stratification. The concluding maxim again identified the “sick” with the “sinner” (2:17), linking this episode to Jesus’ previous attack upon the debt code. The good news is for the social outcast - not for those who benefit from the status quo.

Jesus Next Excuses His disciples from a public fast day (2:18-22). Mark’s community was no doubt impressed by the rigour of pharisaic practice, so Jesus, once again drawing from apocalyptic imagery (“on that day”; “the bridegroom” 2:19f; cf. Matt. 9:15f), responds with the celebrated “wineskins” axiom. The young wine of this new movement must not be co-opted by old forms (cosmetic piety), otherwise the new wine (the holiness of service/ servanthood, (14:25f) will be lost. Finally, the disciples draw fire from the
wine (the holiness of service/servanthood, (14:25f) will be lost. Finally, the disciples draw fire from the Pharisees for walking through a cornfield, stripping and eating the grain from the damaged ears (2:23-28). The complaint appears to refer to Sabbath restrictions regarding transit, sowing and reaping. Jesus appeals to 1 Samuel (21:1-6) citing David’s right to break the law when “in need” (2:25f). As David commandeered the bread for his soldiers while on campaign, so can Jesus’s disciples procure grain on their mission for the Son of Man. But Mark has added something to the OT story. David violated the law because he and his men were truly hungry. Matthew certainly understood the point to be one of justice vs cultic obligation (Matt.12: 1-8). And Mark chooses to introduce the term “bread” (2:26), which will later figure decisively as symbol of community sharing (the feeding of hungry masses in the wilderness, 6:33-44; 8:1-9; 8:14ff).

Each of these three serial episodes addresses some aspect of human sustenance: breaking bread with the socially outcast, ignoring ritual non-eating practices, and procuring grain on the Sabbath. Some socio-historical background clarifies why these issues arise in relation to the Pharisees. The sites of thee stories (table and field) represent what we might today call the “economic sphere” of production and consumption. Serious problems of misappropriation of the fruits of the land existed in Palestine at this time. Galilean peasant resented the control exercised by the Pharisaic establishment over the tithing and marketing of produce. In addition, many poor peasants could not allow their fields to lie fallow during the Sabbath year, which the Pharisees sought to strictly enforce.

The social function of these stories challenges economic control by an elite minority. In order for justice to prevail, table fellowship had to be inclusive. For the poor, hunger was not an issue of ritual piety but a threat to life. Finally, the violation of Sabbath regulations in the cornfield employs civil disobedience to dramatise the issue. This series can be seen as a strong protest against the “politics of food” in Palestine.

Mark 2:23 – 3:12

The Grainfield Action sets the stage for another Sabbath controversy in 3:1-6 and the double climax to the (first) Galilean campaign. If the accusation in 2:24 is a kind of legal warning after which charges will be pressed, Jesus’ summary “overruling” (2:28) ensures that the conflict will escalate. Sure enough in 3:2 we are returned to the heart of the symbolic order (the synagogue on a Sabbath as in 1:21), where the healing story is a context for determined political theatre. It is, one might venture, not unlike being arrested at the Pentagon, being released on bail, and going on to the White House with exactly the same message one had been indicted for!

The two issues of the campaign to date – public healing and Sabbath obligation – here converge, bringing to a head the tension suspended since 1:32. Jesus now intends to force the issue publicly, under the glare of media lights, the authorities posed and ready for him to “cross the line”. It is a showdown between Jesus’ mission of compassion to the poor and the ideological imperatives of the dominant order.

In the classic tradition of civil disobedience, Jesus breaks the law in order to raise deeper issues. Before he acts, he challenges his audience with a paraphrase of the great Deuteronomic ultimatum to the people of Israel (Deut. 30:15f). “Is it against the law to do good on the Sabbath, or evil?” (3:4). He then wryly adds, “To save life or to kill?”, contrasting his own healing ministry with the authorities’ concern for state security (in Mark the verb ‘to kill’ always refers to political execution (sec3 6:19; 8:31; 12:5; 14:1).

In a description of Jesus’ contempt unparalleled in the NT, Mark indicts the audience’s obstinacy (“stubbornness of heart”, 3:5). But beware, The same charge will soon be leveled against the disciples as well (6:52; 8:17). Enraged, the Galilean officials caucus to begin plotting against Jesus (3:6) – a chilling new development that casts a shadow over the rest of the story, until it culminates in Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution. This foreboding turn of events is followed with another withdrawal to the sea and summary section (3:7-12).

Mark 3:13 - 35
In yet another politically loaded symbolic action, Jesus then commissions the discipleship community to carry on the messianic vocation (3:13-19). Ascending a mountain in Mosaic fashion, he “appoints” (same word as used in OT for the choosing of Moses and Aaron, and the priests) the “Twelve” (symbolic of a new ‘tribal’ confederacy in Israel). This is in effect a declaration of a “popular government-in-exile”. Mark will make it clear, however, that this new leadership is not to be patterned upon the model of power (10:35-45).

Jesus Returns Home, again engulfed by the importunate crowd, and Mark fashions the second climax, in which Jesus must face the consequences of his campaign (3:20). His own family believes he has gone too far and, “convinced he is out of his mind” (3:21), urge him to cease and desist. To make matters worse, the scribes who “had come down from Jerusalem” are launching an ideological counter-offensive (3:22). The composition of 3:21-35 is a “sandwich”, a favourite Markan technique of beginning one story, interrupting it with another, and then returning to the original story. This form establishes a fundamental relationship between the two elements. In this case, it dramatises the widening social rift between Jesus’ community and the structures of authority, both the clan and the state.

The exchange in 3:23-30 sees the eruption of patently ideological warfare between Jesus and the scribal officials. Smarting from Jesus’ repudiation of their authority (1:22; 2:6f), the scribes attempt to undermine Jesus’ popular standing by charging that he is in the service of the “prince of demons”. It is the predictable strategy of threatened political leaders: neutralise the opposition by identifying them with the mythic archdemon (Note: “demonising”). To borrow from the symbolic stock of Cold War culture, Jesus is being labelled a “communist.”

As later in Jerusalem (11:27f), Jesus turns his accusers’ words back in them. Spinning a thinly veiled political parable, he speaks of the inevitability of insurrection in a corrupt and divided social order (3:23-26). He then makes his intention clear to his scribal antagonists, liking his mission to a thief who must “bind the strong man in order to ransack his house” (3:27). By the end of the debate, the Teacher has turned the tables completely: it is his opponents, not he, who are in the service of the powers; it is they who blaspheme (3:28-30). Liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo writes, “The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognise, with ‘theological joy’, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one’s very eyes.”

Recall that Jesus has already been announced as “the stronger one” (1:7); later, in his second campaign, he will exorcise a house divided in its purpose (11:15-17). Mark is here demonstrating the political geography of the apocalyptic struggle initiated in 1:13. Jesus (the “true lord of the house” 13:35) is leading a revolt against the powers (the scribal establishment) in a battle not only for the hearts and minds of the people but for history itself.

Mark appears to have taken his cue from Isaiah’s vision: YHWH will liberate the captives from the grip of the strong ones (Is. 49:24f), the powers will be bound and imprisoned (Is. 24:21). And however unsettling the metaphor of criminal breaking and entering may seem, Mark drew it from the most enduring of the primitive Christian eschatological traditions: the Lord’s advent as “a thief in the night” (Matt.24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). (Note: ‘the kingdom is taken by violence’ – the edge, calculated recklessness, chutzpah of the criminal etc.).

In conclusion, Mark returns us to the brewing family crisis. Jesus’ rupture with the social order will now be complete (3:31-35). In antiquity, the kinship system rigidly determined personality and identity, vocational prospects, and facilitated socialization. Jesus understands that to weave an alternative social fabric, there must be a new kinship model. The discipleship community is a family of “whoever does the will of God” (3:35).
Mark 4: 1-35

The campaign draw to a close as Jesus again retires to the sea to reflect on the state of the Messianic mission (4:1f). In the first of two extended parabolic sermons (13:4f), Jesus illustrates the kingdom of God with images drawn from daily peasant life, its hardship and its wisdom. These parables speak frankly of the obstacles to the discipleship adventure (4:3-25) and enjoin revolutionary patience (4:21-32). The sermon concludes with an insistence that, despite long odds, the small seed (the discipleship community) will indeed take root in a hostile world (4:30-32), echoing the prophetic promise that God will “bring low the high tree and make high the low tree” (Ezekiel 17:22-24).

In his symbolic action, Mark’s Jesus attacks a social order that had betrayed the ideological basis on which it was founded. As our modern social codes are allegedly rooted in social contract theory and the notion of constitutional rights, so in Judaism there was a covenant with YHWH. The debt system was originally meant to promote the idea that life and the land are gifts from God, which the people must share with God and each other, so that equality and economic sufficiency might flourish in the community. Similarly, the purity system was supposed to maintain the notion of a chosen or holy people, to preserve Israel’s communal identity distinct from the social practices of surrounding cultures. (Note: chosen to be holy).

But, as in our own society, these social ideals had become the pretext for the erection of class divisions within Israel, and the mechanism for exploitation and control by the few over the many. The three great dictums of this section (2:10; 2:27, and 3:4) reiterate that any and all social codes must function, to put it in modern parlance, solely “for people, not for profit.”

The social context in Mark’s narrative may be alien from our own in forms, but not in substance. Our world is hardly free of apartheid, class stratification, or “strong men”. These must be unmasked, and symbolic direct action is perhaps the most powerful means. When protesters trespass on the “sacred sites” of nuclear weapons bunkers and arms factories, they are directly challenging the sanctity of these “holy” sites (note challenging the legitimacy – lawfulness), symbolised by barbed wire, and their “priestly caretakers” with security clearances. The same is true of those who open their homes and churches to the refugee or homeless poor, regardless of official social boundaries (or convention).

Does interpreting Jesus’ acts of healing and exorcism as symbolic action preclude seeing them also as concrete acts of compassion for specific individuals. Not at all. However, we need to be careful about the issues pertaining to our own cultural biases concerning “health”. Even in our own overwhelmingly biomedical culture, “contagion” is still socially determined – witness the political epidemiology surrounding the new “leprosy” of AIDS.

There are many today who simply do not believe that their liberation today is dependent upon being able to talk or walk, for example. Wheelchair-bound persons are insisting on equal social access, while the deaf community insists that sign language be respected as an equal by the dominant verbal culture. The traditional definitions of physical and mental “disability”, with their ideologies of dependence and segregation, are being challenged by the right to fully human – not “handicapped” – lives in society. Obviously, this also challenges interpretations which stress the bio-medical definition of wholeness in the biblical narratives of healing.
THE MIRACLE OF ONE LOAF

“Do you not yet understand?” (Mark 8:21)

(4:35 – 8:21)

Mark’s gospel is the manifesto of a Christian community struggling to incarnate a new way of life which was in fundamental conflict with the dominant socio-political (+ ecclesiastical) order of 1st century Roman Palestine. We saw that Mark’s narrative strategy in the first major section of the story was predominantly subversive, functioning to delegitimise the ideologies and institutions with which the Kingdom of God contended. At the same time, certain aspects of the first campaign articulated a positive alternative, such as fellowship with the outcast (2:15f) and the creation of a discipleship community (1:15-20;3:13-19). The next major section (4:35 – 8:21) makes this constructive task its central concern.

Jesus departure in a boat across the Sea of Galilee (4:35) signals the beginning of a new round of symbolic action which dramatises the concrete social and economic shape of the Kingdom as a “new creation”.

Scholars have puzzled over the fact that Mark – the sparest of the evangelists – in this section waxes curiously redundant. He narrates not one but two perilous sea crossings (4:35-41; 6:45-53), and two feedings of hungry masses in the wilderness (6:33-44; 8:1-9). In addition, Jesus’ healings are neatly organised into pairs: two Jews (5:21) and two Gentiles (7:24-37). The notoriously superficial commentary on these stories misses their significance by ignoring both their social and literary dimensions.

Remembering the essential relationship between form and content, we can better observe Mark’s narrative strategy by stepping away from the chronological flow of events in order to identify the underlying structure of the section. This approach reveals a distinct pattern of two parallel cycles of ministry on different ‘sides’ of the Sea (of Galilee), linked by boat trips back and forth across the sea. Since the section opens and closes with such voyages, we begin this study there.

Jesus’ first of two extended sermons (4:1-34) concluded his ministry in and around Capernaum, located in Jewish Galilee, near the lake (sea). Afterwards he invites his disciples to embark with him on a boat to “the other side” of the sea (4:35). Mark consistently refers to this freshwater lake as a “sea” in order to invoke OT images. During this voyage a storm arises, and in a moment of high pathos, the disciples shriek at their dozing leader, “Master, do you not care? We’re going to die!” (4:38; see Jonah 1). Jesus silences the winds (see Psalm 107:23, 29), just as he previously did the demons (4:39; 1:25). The episode ends, however, not with relief or triumph but a mutual incredulity, even suspicion. Jesus asks, “Do you not yet have faith?” (4:40; see 8:2). The disciples murmur among themselves saying “Who then is this, that even the sea and wind obey him?” (4:41).

Recall that upon arriving in the Gentile territory of the Decapolis (5:1, 20), Jesus wrestled a demon to learn his name (5:7-10) and then drove this legion into the sea (5:13; see Exodus 14). This symbolic confrontation with the powers – imperial Rome’s occupation of Palestine – inaugurated Jesus’ ministry to the Gentiles, after which he returned to “Jewish” territory (5:21).

The Next Voyage occurs in the middle of (this study’s) text, only this time Jesus must force his disciples to get into the boat for another voyage – by themselves – to “the other side” (6:45). The disciples again struggle against the winds and are again rescued by Jesus (6:48-51; see Exodus 3:14; 33:19, 22). The crossing, however, is unsuccessful: the disciples do not reach Bethsaida, on the eastern shore, but are driven back to Gennesaret on the western shore (6:53). As a result, Mark escalates his criticism of the disciples: they are “hard-hearted” - an accusation previously reserved for Jesus’s political and religious opponents (6:52; see 3:5).
The Charge is Because “they did not understand about the loaves”. It is this mysterious business about the “loaves” that becomes the focus of the third and final voyage to “the other side” (8:13-21). But this crossing, which does finally arrive at Bethsaida (8:22) narrates neither storm nor rescue – only a conversation about bread. In fact this story represents a kind of “interpretive epilogue” to the first half of the gospel (8:14-21). In it, Jesus interrogates his disciples – and by extension the reader – about whether or not they have understood the meaning of his actions. The issue revolves around a distinction between ‘loaf’ and ‘loaves’, so some literal translation will help: “The disciples had forgotten to bring loaves, and had only one loaf with them in the boat... And Jesus said to them, “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no loaves?” (8:14.17a). Jesus’ exasperation with his disciples’ “dysfunctioning” faculties of comprehension (heart, eyes and ears, 8:17) calls to mind Moses’ similar censure of his people who had also forgotten what they had “known, seen and heard” of the liberating acts of YHWH (Deut. 29:2-4). Jesus thus echoes the Deuteronomic exhortation to “remember” (8:18; see Deut. 32:7), which is also Mark’s signal to the reader to review the narrative. With such permission to “jump around” in the narrative, we now go back and read the section from the vantage point of this last boat conversation, taking its cues and clues. First and foremost we are directed to the two feedings in the wilderness.

We pick up the story at 6:30f where the disciples have returned from their first solo mission (6:32f). Jesus urges them to withdraw for reflection (see 1:35), but once again the retreat is unsuccessful (6:32f). Jesus feels deep compassion (literally: “guts were churning”) for these crowds who have sought him out even in the wilderness, and he proceeds to reach them until evening (6:34). As it grows late, the disciples demand that Jesussend the people away so that they can buy food in the neighbouring villages (6:36f). Jesus’ reply is blunt: “You give them something to eat!!”, he says. The disciples are indignant at having to dig into their own pockets to aid the hungry (6:36f). But while they agonise Jesus acts. Determining the food on hand, he organises the crowd, blesses the loaves and fishes and distributes them (6:38-41). Mark is careful to report that nothing “supernatural” occurs here, except that “all ate and were satisfied” (6:42).

The episode makes at least three OT allusions, each of which adds to its social significance. The most obvious is YHWH’s sustaining of hungry Hebrews in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The phrases “going and coming” (6:31) and “sheep without a shepherd” (6:34) are derived from the tradition in which Joshua is appointed “general” over the tribal confederacy (Numbers 27:16f). Above all, however, Mark is here drawing upon the “food miracles” of the prophet Elisha during a time of famine (2 Kings 4:42-44).

While theologians love to see eucharistic significance in this feeding, the Elisha story suggests that the economic dimension is paramount. Twice the disciples try to solve the problem by referring it to “market economics” (6:36). But Jesus insists the problem cannot be “sent away” and proposes instead a kind of enacted parable of just distribution, an alternative of self-sufficiency through a practice of sharing available resources.

The same themes are reiterated in the second, briefer, feeding story (8:1-9), which this time takes place in the Gentile Decapolis (7:31). Jesus is again moved by the plight of the crowd: “If I should send them away hungry, they will faint on the way” (8:3). The disciples respond this time is despair: “How can anyone find bread for all these people (out here) in the wilderness?” Which is to say, How can the problem be solved outside of the economic system of the dominant order? Again (repetition being the key to pedagogical success) Mark narrates the solution: Jesus organises, the people share, and all are satisfied (8:5-9).

These stories reflect the concrete historical situation of the majority of Galilee’s rural population. Hunger and poverty were ubiquitous among those disenfranchised by a feudal system of land ownership and an economic system in which the countryside was bled dry by urban and foreign trading interests. The same perspective persuaded Jesus’ sermon of parables, in which he brought theology to earth by using real-life, economic metaphors taken from the daily agrarian world to describe the kingdom. There Jesus presented a harvest of unprecedented yield (4:8), which would later shatter the cycle of poverty in which
the indentured peasant – the “sower” – was trapped. In the wilderness feedings, this hope takes flesh in “the miracle of Enough” for the hungry masses through a model of cooperative consumption. Mark will later make it clear that the discipleship community struggles to embody this economic alternative in its own life (10:28-31). And just as it is contrasted there with the practice of the rich (10:17-27), so too here is an implicit criticism of market economics: “Shall we go buy 200 denarii worth of bread…?” (6:37). Indeed, Jesus had warned against this “measures” system, which served only to widen the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” (4:24-25).

Returning to the epilogue, we discover that there is a social as well as an economic significance to the “loaves”. In 8:19-20, Jesus has us repeat the symbolic numbers clues. Do we understand? The five loaves for the five thousand and 12 baskets left over represent the Jewish world (the five books of Moses and the 12 tribes of Israel). The seven loaves and baskets left over in turn connote the inclusion of the Gentile world (in numerology 7 is the number of completion). Mark even uses different Jewish and Greek terms for ‘basket’ in the respective stories.

In Markan symbolics, the purpose of the boat trips from one side to the other has been to bridge the segregated world of Jew and Gentile. There are not “separate” loaves – only “the one loaf,” to be shared together by the one integrated community of the kingdom. That this task of social reconciliation was not only difficult but well-nigh inconceivable explains the harrowing sea stories.

The “wind and waves” (in Jewish mythology the cosmic forces of chaos, see Ps. 104:6-7) opposing the attempted crossings represent the fact that the ideological and institutional structures of segregation were considered part of the “natural order” in antiquity. The enmity between Jew and Gentile was seen by most of Mark’s contemporaries as the prototype of all human hostility – not unlike the Cold War today. The social, political and cultural project of peacemaking between the “two humanities” was central to the gospel of the first Christians, especially Paul. Mark’s boat on the sea was adopted by the early Church as its symbol and is preserved today in the WCC as a sign of the struggle to overcome the alienation and enmity that keeps humanity – and the body of Christ – divided.

The “storms of opposition” to this reconciliation were, and are, real social and political forces. Mark alludes to this at the outset of his interpretive epilogue, when Jesus warns the disciples against the “leaven” of the pharisees and of Herod (8:15). This leaven threatens to spoil the “one loaf” and is another clue sending us back to the narrative.

If the “one loaf” implied a common meal, then surely the most formidable barrier to its realisation was the purity code’s prohibitions regarding table fellowship with the “unclean.” We have seen that the social “site” of the meal table was central to the maintenance of group boundaries in Pharisaic practice (Mark returns to this 7:1-23). In fact the demands of ritual purity and kosher diet were seen throughout the early Jewish community as the major ideological obstacle to the project of integration, since both Luke and Paul address it (cf. Acts 10:9-16; Romans 14).

Mark Develops Jesus’ debate with the “leaven” of the Pharisees in three parts. The first part served to explain to the non-Jewish readers some of the major issues involved in Pharisaic criticism (7:1-5). The “washing” of hands, produce and utensils had nothing to do with hygiene but concerned the ritual removal of possible impurity. Jesus responds to the accusation by counterattacking the ideological foundations of his opponents, the Pharisaic oral code, the “tradition of the elders” (7:6-13). He only then returns to the original issue of meal sharing, offering yet another parable (7:14-23). The parable plays rhetorically on the opposition between “internal” and “external” (7:15). The editorial comment interprets it to mean that Jesus “declared all things clean” (7:19) thus climaxing an assault on the purity code that began when Jesus declared the leper clean in 1:41f.
But now Jesus asserts his (ideological) alternative: the true “site of purity” is not the body but the heart (the moral centre of the person in Jewish anthropology; 7:18f). Jesus thus redraws the lines of group identity in ethical terms, in place of the ethnocentricity of the purity code is now the rigour of self-scrutiny.

What is the relevance of the inserted dispute concerning the oral tradition? In his citation of Isaiah, Mark claims that it is precisely the site of the heart in which the Pharisee is alienated from God (7:6), because he places the demands of the dominant symbolic order above the needs of the oppressed.

Jesus illustrates this with an example from Pharisaic oral tradition, a body of interpretation of Mosaic law they regarded as authoritative. The practice of “corban” concerned the willing of one’s estate to the Temple, a vow which essentially froze one’s assets until death, at which point they were released to the Temple treasury (7:11). Such wills represented an important source of revenue. But Jesus points out that this practice might well preclude one from the Torah responsibility to provide economic support for one’s parents (see Ex. 20:12); hence the “vow” to the temple becomes a “curse” upon the elderly who are left financially ostracised (6:10; Lev. 20:9).

It is no accident that Mark began this episode (7:1) by linking the Pharisees with the Jerusalem scribes (see 2:16). Later, Jesus will indict both the scribal class and the Temple treasury in a political economy that exploits the poor (12:38-44). By portraying their support for this system, Mark implies that the Pharisees are simply an extension of the long arm of the Jerusalem establishment. He endeavoured to persuade poorer Jews that the purity system which purported to uphold their ethnic identity was in fact the very system that oppressed them; those who endorsed this system “nullified the command of God” with their contempt for the weak (7:9).

The “Leaven of Herod” on the other hand, is illustrated by Mark’s flashback account of the execution of John the Baptist (6:14-29), which belatedly explains the circumstances surrounding the prophet’s arrest in 1:14. This is one of three episodes concerning “rejected prophets” which Mark interrelates by weaving them together. The series begins with Jesus’ rejection by his own village and kin, becoming a “prophet without honour” (6:1-6). Rendered a “stranger at home”, Jesus next instructs his exile community in learning to be “at home among strangers” (6:7-13). He dispatches his disciples on the messianic mission of proclamation, healing and exorcism with only the bare necessities for travel. These preachers have no well-funded, high-tech evangelistic road-show; they are absolutely dependent on the people they serve.

Finally, intruding between the departure (6:12) and return of the Apostles (6:30) is the account of John’s date at the hands of Herod (Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilea and Petraea, 4 BC-39 AD). In a threadbare transition, Mark tells us that Herod believed Jesus to be John redivivus (returned to life) – in other words the successor of the Baptist’s mission of proclaiming repentance (6:14-16).

In that mission, John tangled with the Galilean nobility and lost. The Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of Mark, tells us that Herod had to get rid of John for a plainly political reason: his preaching was stirring up the people to insurrection. This has led many historical critics to dismiss Mark’s account of the king’s moral predicament with his brother’s wife and his vacillation toward John as pious legend. It is the critics, however, who must be dismissed, for Mark’s account is hardly pious! First, intermarriage is fundamental to the building and consolidation of royal dynasties, so John’s objection could scarcely have been more political (6:17). Second, the half Jewish Herodians conformed to Jewish law only when deemed politically convenient or expedient; otherwise they pursued an aggressive policy of promoting Hellenisation, resented by Jewish nationalists. By insisting that Herod be accountable to Torah, the Mosaic Law (6:18) Mark was raising a volatile political issue in the neo-colonial arrangement of Palestine.
Nor should we fail to notice that Mark’s portrait of Herodian court intrigue takes on the character of a dark parody (6:19-28). The king throws a dinner party for the ruling elite – nobility, army, and civic leaders (6:21). Despite this impressive gathering of government, military and economic interests, however, it is a young dancing girl and a drunken oath that finally determine the fate of the prophet John (6:22f). The sardonic caricature of the murderous whims of the powerful stands within the biblical tradition of pitting prophets against kings, a kind of hybrid between the story of Nathan and David (2 Sam.12) and Esther and Ahasuerus (Esther 1-7).

The close of the flashback (6:29) prefigures the fate of John’s successor, Jesus. By tightly knitting together these three stories together – of Jesus, the apostles, and John – Mark identifies the common destiny of all who preach repentance. What holds for “Elijah” will hold for “the Son of Man” (see 9-13). So, too, with Jesus’ successors; the disciples must also reckon with their day “in court” (13:9-11) and, in the end, with their cross as well (8:34).

Mark has unmasked the two main forces in Galilean society trying to subvert Jesus’ kingdom programme of justice and integration: the Pharisees and Herodians (3:6). On the one hand, Pharisaic exclusivism opposed social intercourse between Jew and Gentile on grounds of purity. On the other, the Herodians offered cultural assimilation and collaboration with Rome (12:13-17) but threatened to neutralise any who resisted (as John found out). The “leaven” of either can destroy the delicate social experiment of the “one loaf.”

The Social Vision of this section is finally filled out by two pairs of healings. These further articulate the messianic inclusivity that brings wholeness to both the outcast Jew and the Gentiles. In 5:22-43 Mark offers yet another story-within-a-story. Jesus is approached by a synagogue ruler who appeals on behalf of his sick daughter (5:22-24). On his way to heal her, Jesus is pressed by the crowds and finally interrupted by a woman with an ongoing hemorrhaging (5:25-32). But, in attending to her, he appears to default on his original task.

The two characters who fall at Jesus’ feet with their petitions (5:22, 33) represent archetypes at the opposite ends of the Jewish social spectrum. Jairus is the “head” both of his family and his social group (the synagogue); he approaches Jesus directly as befits male equals. In contrast, the woman from the crowd is both anonymous (she reaches out covertly) and status-less. If, according to the purity code, a menstruating woman had to be quarantined (Lev. 15:19f), how much more one who bled continually? She is doubly poor, not only impure but exploited as well, bankrupted by profiteering physicians (5:26).

Yet it is her initiative that earns the woman wholeness, and the system is again symbolically subverted in Jesus’ touch (as in 1:41). Suddenly she is brought from the margins of the story into its centre; she is now “daughter”, her importunity accepted as “faith” (5:34). Her status now exceeds that of Jesus’ own male disciples who are “without faith” (4:40). But what of the original “daughter”? The episode appears to grind to a tragic halt as Jesus is informed that she has died during the delay (5:35).

Undeterred, Jesus exhorts Jairus to follow the example of the poor woman and believe (5:36). At the house the mourning turns to derision at Jesus’ insistence that the girls only “sleeps” (39), but he raises her, to the “astonishment” of the witnesses (v.42 see 16:6). Needless to say, Mark’s asides – the girl is 12 years old, the woman suffered for 12 years – are not incidental, but the key to the social function of this doublet.

The number symbolises again the 12 tribes of Israel: one “daughter” represents those privileged under the dominant order, the other those impoverished by it. According to Mark, this order, symbolised by the synagogue ruler, is itself “on the verge of death”. If it wishes to live (5:23) it must embrace the faith of the kingdom, a new world social model in which “the last are first” and the “least are the greatest” (see 10:31, 43). Matthew’s blunt threat to the Jewish leaders that “prostitutes are making their way into the king-
The corresponding doublet in Gentile territory (7:24, 31) further extends the Kingdom’s inclusivity (7:24-37). The Syrophoenician woman, appealing on behalf of her daughter, represents the Gentile world and serves as an intentional parallel to Jairus. The modern reader, unacquainted with accepted social propriety in Hellenistic antiquity, misses the scandal of this encounter, for it narrates that would have been inconceivable according to the conventions of Mediterranean “honour culture.”

To begin with, a strange woman approaches a man in the privacy of his house, worse, she is a pagan soliciting favour from a Jew (7:24-26). Jesus initially responds in the fashion expected of the male: he defends the collective honour of his people and rebuffs her (7:7, according to the rabbinic saying*** of the time, “He who eats with an idolater is like one who eats with a dog” (7:28). But the real jolt is the conclusion. Jesus, who masters every other opponent in verbal riposte, concedes the argument to the woman (7:29). (*** a Gentile woman can demolish Jewish midrash/ proto-talmudism).

In the same way that Jesus’ command in 5:43 anticipated the feeding of the Jews, so too does this story prefigure the feeding of the Gentiles (8:1f), for “the children have indeed first been satisfied” (7:27, see 6:42). Jesus has allowed his privileged status as a male to be “affronted” for the sake of inclusivity (see 9:38-40). So must the collective honour of Judaism suffer the collective “indignity” of welcoming Gentiles as equals in the Messianic order. That the Kingdom is now open to the Gentile world is confirmed by the subsequent healing in 7:31-37. Yet even here there is irony: Jesus can make the Gentile deaf hear and the mute proclaim (7:36f), but not, it turns out, his own disciples (see 8:18).

This section contains one last episode, which is in fact the first element in Mark’s descriptive epilogue: the demand for “a sign from heaven” (8:11f). The Pharisees test Jesus (see 8:11; 10:2; 12:15), who refuses to give a sign to “this generation” (8:12). This will be an important clue to a proper understanding of what Jesus means when he reveals the “heavenly” spectacle that will be seen by “this generation” (8:38).

In Mark’s gospel, signs are sought only by unbelievers; they are unreliable for discerning the meaning of events (see 13:4-5, 22). For Jesus, the true “proof” of God’s presence is not heavenly but earthly – the sick healed, the poor liberated, the hungry fed, and enemies reconciled. Surely these are disturbing stories in our world of implicit apartheid, vast economic disparity, and institutionalised enmity. For affluent Christians in a starving world, the command “You feed them” has not lost its sting. The Kingdom imperative to cross the stormy seas of racism, to give priority to the poor, and to rediscover the “one loaf” of human solidarity is no less urgent, nor is the promise that Jesus has already forged the way any less difficult to truly believe. Do we in the Church today have eyes to see this vision, or have we given way to fear (4:40), hardheartedness (6:52), and despair (8:4).

It is the historical vision of justice and compassion that is dramatised by the symbolic acts of Christ who breaks bread in the wilderness and walks on water. The first half of the gospel closes with Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21) It is as if Mark is also warning his readers not to proceed with the rest of the story until we have correctly comprehended “the meaning of the loaves.”

Do we “see”? In the realism of Mark’s gospel, the answer is probably not. He is well aware of how easily intimacy with Jesus can be accompanied by a lack of understanding of his Way. And he will show us how incomprehension can all too soon turn to antagonism (see 8:32) and finally defection (see 14:27,50). Yet Mark opens the second half of the story with a symbolic action of Hope: the healing of a blind man (8:22-26). And at that point, Jesus and the disciples abruptly abandon the site of boat and sea, and set out on the boldest and most dangerous journey of all; the long march to Jerusalem.

20.
EMBRACING THE WAY OF JESUS

“I believe! Help me in my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

Mark 8:27 -

Mark began the first half of his gospel with a prologue heralding “the way” (1:3) and brought it to a close with the question addressed to both the disciples and reader: “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21). He now opens the second half again “on the way” (8:27), with yet another query: “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29a). Upon our answer hangs the character of the Christian witness in the world.

Do we really know who Jesus is and what he is about? In its long tradition of theological dogmatics, the Church, like Peter, has answered assuredly: Jesus is the Christ (8:29b). It is something of a shock, then, to discover that in Mark’s story this “correct” answer issues not in commendation (compare Matt. 16:17-19) but rather a confessional “crisis” (8:34f). The crisis leads to Jesus’ second call to discipleship: the invitation to take up the cross (8:34). This episode represents the mid-point of Mark’s story; it is the narrative and ideological fulcrum upon which the gospel as a whole balances. Its point: if we wish to know and follow Jesus, theological orthodoxy is not sufficient. We must embrace Jesus’ Way.

What is this ‘way’? In Mark’s day, the cross was neither a religious icon nor a metaphor for personal anguish or humility. It had only one meaning: that terrible form of execution reserved by Rome for dissenters. Thus discipleship is revealed as a vocation of non-violent resistance to the Powers. This way is further broadened and deepened in Jesus’ ensuing teaching. It also entails solidarity with the “least” in society (9:35f), equality and compassion within the family and community (10:15), economic justice and sharing (10:29), and service rather than domination (10:42-44). But the tragedy is that this vocation all too often falls on “deaf ears” among Jesus’ disciples.

What we might call the second prologue regenerates the discipleship narrative in a new direction; the way through the wilderness (1:2) now becomes the way leading towards the final showdown in Jerusalem (10:32). This section of the gospel is structured around three portents, in which Jesus speaks of his impending arrest, trial and execution by the authorities (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). After each portent, Mark immediately indicates that the disciples have rejected Jesus’ way (8:32; 9:33f; 10:35-39). This in turn issues in new teachings, whose themes are stated as rhetorical antitheses (save life—lose life, first—last, greatest—least).

The triple cycle lends the character of a “catechism” to this section and illustrates clearly the essential relationship between content and form in Marcan narrative. We see that this is a “school of the road”, for even as it unfolds, the community is involved in the long march from the far north of Palestine to the outskirts of Jerusalem. The catechism is framed by two stories of blond men receiving sight, in Bethsaida (8:22-26) and Jericho (10:46-52), and in these stories Mark’s strategy of healing as symbolic action takes on a new dimension. As we saw, by the close of the first half of the gospel, the crisis of the disciples’ “hardheartedness” (6:52; 8:17) had taken centre stage. Their “faculties if perception” (eyes to see, ears to hear) had failed to comprehend Jesus’ symbolics (8:18-20). It is no accident, then, that the second half opens with the arrival at Bethsaida (the destination which the second boat journey had failed to reach, see 6:45-53). There a blind man is given sight. Even as the disciples’ “blindness and deafness”

Throughout this middle section of his story, even as the disciples’ “blindness and deafness” deepens, Mark is careful to interweave a counter-discourse of hope in Jesus’ final four healings: the healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment (7:31-37), the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26), the exorcism of an unclean spirit (9:14-29); and the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). These readers give the reader hope despite the deteriorating storyline of misunderstanding in the catechism, because Jesus can
“make the deaf hear and the dumb speak” (7:37), help the blind to “see clearly” (8:27), and restore the “dead” to life (9:26), so that discipleship is possible (10:52).

The Second Half of the gospel opens with a bold transformation of the great Hebrew tradition of YHWH’s self-revelation to Moses from a declaration (“I am” Ex. 3:7-14) into a question (“who do you say I am?” 8:27, 29). The issue of Jesus’ identity has been lingering in the background (4:41; 6:3), but now Jesus suddenly turns to address it directly.

Public perception recognises Jesus as a popular prophet (8:28), threatening enough to the ruling elite (see the report to Herod in 6:14-16). But when the disciples are asked for their own opinion, Peter hails Jesus as Messiah introducing this politically loaded term for the first time (8:29). Messiah is the royal figure who will restore the political fortunes of Israel; the triumphal revolution, Peter is saying, is at hand.

We, having the foreknowledge of Mark’s title (1:1), approve of his identification. But to our chagrin, Peter is immediately silenced by Jesus (8:30) – just as were the demons who tried to “name” Jesus earlier (see 1:25; 3:12). With the phrase “Jesus began to teach them that it was necessary that the Son of Man must suffer”, the story departs in a radically new direction (8:31).

The portents have traditionally been held on the one hand as proof either of his divine clairvoyance or a doctrine of predestination, or on the other dismissed as “later theological interpretation” added to the story. All this misses Mark’s point: “Necessity” refers to the conviction that the vocation of Messianic justice will inevitably clash with the Powers.

At key points in the second half if the gospel, Mark appeals to what we might call the “script of prophetic radicalism”, (“as it is written”, see 14:21, 27). What befell John the Baptist can only be expected to befall Jesus (9:12f), and the same destiny awaits faithful disciples (see 10:39; 13:9). This “script” is clearly articulated in Jesus later parable of the tenants (12:1-11). The portents, also, do not use the term Messiah, overhauling its content by identifying it with the third person “Son of Man”. Within Mark’s story, this persona has been established as the one who challenges the authority of the dominant ideological system of debt and Sabbath 92:10, 28). But the title is taken from the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7, which provides the key to understanding Jesus second call to discipleship, as we shall see.

Peter will have no part of Jesus’ Messianic revisionism. The “confessional crisis” us thus articulates in an escalating series of sharp rebukes, ending in Jesus’ sobering “counter-naming” of Peter (8:32f). According to Peter’s orthodoxy, to be “on God’s side” means the guarantee of success and power. But this directly contradicts the prophetic “script” and is the very logic by which the Messianic vision is subverted.

Jesus has spoken the word of the cross “openly” (8:32b); in Peter’s resistance to it, the sower parable is enacted: “These are the ones along the way where the word is sown; when they hear it, Satan immediately comes and takes the word away from them” (4:15). Jesus thus issues his second call to discipleship, now given specifically political content: it means to “deny one’s self and take up one’s cross” (8:34).

THE CROSS WAS A COMMON SIGHT in the revolutionary Palestine of Mark’s time; in this recruiting call, the disciple is invited to reckon with the consequences facing those who dare challenge the hegemony of imperial Rome. The semantics of ‘self-denial’ take us not into the sphere of private asceticism, but of public political trial. As the story itself will show, whether or not one must “take up the cross” depends on what one stands for in the courtroom. This is the true site of confession.

In the implied context of juridical interrogation, to deny one’s self is to admit political alignment with Jesus, since the result is certain execution “for his sake and the gospel”. This, however, is not to “lose” but to truly “save” life (8:35). Conversely, to deny Jesus is to forfeit true life and purpose. In economic terms, saving one’s skin at the cost of apostasy is a “bad investment”; literally a return to the “whole world” would not represent a “profit” but, rather, a “dead loss” (8:36).
Jesus closes this little homily by invoking a different vision of judgment (8:38). Traditional exegesis has interpreted this verse in terms of the Second Coming: “Bear the cross and win the crown”. But the “Son of Man” is a specific reference to the “heavenly courtroom” vision of Daniel 7. Written two centuries earlier during the persecutions by the Hellenist tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes 1V, the book of Daniel was a manifesto of Jewish resistance. Its stories of heroic fidelity which defied death encouraged beleaguered Jews whom the state was trying to coerce into apostasy by employing the threat of capital punishment (Dan 3-6).

Daniel 7 switches to apocalyptic narrative to make the same point. This employs a “vision” which reinterprets events by bifurcating reality. On the one hand, the prophet “sees” (Dan 7:2) oppressive rulers (“beasts”) who appear to be prevailing in the historical moment in their struggle for hegemony (Dan 7:2-8, 19f, 23f) and persecution of the Jews (7:21,25). But what is really happening is YHVH’s judgment upon the beasts (7:9-12, 22, 26), with true hegemony being handed over to the faithful (7:14, 18, 27). At the centre of the vision stands YHVH’s “court of justice” (7:9f); adjudicated by the “Son of Man” (7:13f).

Mark adopts this biblical perspective of apocalyptic vision; there is not one courtroom in which the believer stands, but two. To be acquitted before the Powers is to be “ashamed” in the court of the Son of Man, and vice versa. Thus Mark presents Daniel’s Son of Man simultaneously as defendant (8:31) and prosecutor (8:38). This “courtroom discourse” appears again later 13:9; and its drama is above all enacted in the trial of Jesus Himself. Peter will “deny” Jesus to avoid persecution (14:66f), while Judas will “sell out” for a small profit (14:11) but at the cost of his very life (14:21f). Jesus alone will “confess the Son of Man” before the authorities (14:62; 15:2) and so “take up his cross” (15:25).

Mark 9:1 -

Apocalyptic faith gives not only meaning but power to the suffering that is a consequence of a “true confession”. Jesus’ promise in 9:1 that “this generation” will “see the kingdom come with power” cannot according to the logic of 8:11f refer to a heavenly spectacle of divine retribution. Rather, as I will argue, it refers to the apocalyptic moment of the cross. Apocalyptic vision gives us “eyes to see” the significance of Jesus’ death at the end of the story. At the very moment the Powers appear to have triumphed, Jesus’ non-violent power topples their rule of domination once and for all (compare 13:24-27 with 15:33-38).

This is confirmed by the Transfiguration vision which ensues (9:2-8). Just as Daniel’s first vision was later confirmed by a man in glorified clothing (Dan 10:5f), so too the disciples now behold Jesus in shining raiment, the apocalyptic symbol of martyrdom (see Rev. 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13). The setting (9:2) is also meant to recall the giving of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:15f); here the martyr-Jesus is sanctioned by the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Peter, for a second time, misunderstands the discourse if suffering for that of triumphalism (9:5). He is again contradicted, this time by the divine voice itself, who in former times had spoken to Moses (Ex. 33:18f) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:11f). But here the revelation from the cloud simply repeats the testimony of the “apocalyptic moment” of the first prologue. As the mission of the “stronger one” was legitimated At Baptism (1:7-11), so the Way of the Cross is endorsed here: “Listen to him” (9:7).

The disciples are mystified (9:10), and Mark closes his cycle of argument begun in 8:28 by returning to the prophetic “script” (9:11-13). Orthodoxy believes Elijah must first return to guarantee blessing instead of judgment (see Mal. 4:6); Jesus replies that both the Son of Man and Elijah will inevitably share the same political destiny, which is the true way to liberation. “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him” (9:7). But the disciples seem to be as “deaf” as they are “blind”! No wonder that the next episode involves a father’s plea on behalf of a different “son” who is oppressed by a “deaf and dumb spirit” (9:17, 25). The disciples, who have been given exorcism authority (3:15; 6:7), are not “strong enough” to cast out this spirit (9:14-18, 28). The
disciples are the true subjects of this story: the poignant cry of the father articulates their own struggle: “I believe! Help me in my unbelief!” (9:24).

The demon represents the “power” of unbelief that renders us unable and unwilling to hear and proclaim the way of the cross. As the section on apostasy will show, interpersonal relationships (9:42f), torment “by fire and water” (9:22) symbolises the anguish of those who try to “save” their lives by denying Jesus. To exorcise this demon truly involves “dying and rising” (9:26f; see 5:41f). But the focus of the episode is not the cure but the impotence: “Why could we not cast it out?” (9:28). Here Jesus for the first time exhorts the disciples to prayer (9:29).

For Mark, the power of unbelief can only be combated with prayer, which is connected to the power of belief (11:23f) and to “Abba” (Father) for whom “all things are possible” (14:36). To pray is to resist the despair by which the Powers rule, in our hearts and in the world – the despair that tells us that genuine personal and social transformation is impossible. And have we not been socialised into impotence “since childhood” (9:21)? Against the deep sleep of hopelessness, prayer summons the “strength to stay awake” (14:37f). If we have not faced the shadows within us, we cannot possibly follow Jesus’ way, as the disciples will soon discover (14:41).

**BUT THE WAY OF THE CROSS** is not solely a *via negativa* of non-violent resistance to the Powers. It is also the constructive practice of justice and service in every sphere of life. The Messianic revolution is not about seizing power in order to impose a new social order from the top down; it seeks to transform relationships in building the new order from the bottom up. Thus it begins with the “least”. Jesus recognises the structures of domination in personal and social as well as political (and religious) existence; his Way can be denied just as easily in interpersonal relationships (9:37-41) as in the courtroom.

The second cycle is the longest of the three (9:30-10:31) and exhibits certain similarities to catechetical traditions concerning internal family and community life found elsewhere in the NT (see Coloss. 3:12-4:6). We find here teaching concerning children (Mark 9:36f; 10:13-16), parents (10:2-12), group boundaries (9:38-41), community discipline (9:42-50), and community economics (10:17-31).

The cycle begins with the second portent (9:30-32), which is followed by Jesus’ expose of more blindness. The disciples are caught in an internal power struggle on the way (9:33f). This sets the stage for another round of teaching in which the “save or lose life” theme is restated in terms of the daily exercise of social power (9:35). These antitheses are not offered as mystical paradoxes but as concrete illustrations of what it means to subvert the dominant relations of power in the world. Jesus begins with his primary object lesson, the child whom he twice brings into the centre of our attention (9:36; 10:13). Few commentators take this lesson seriously, offering quaint and idealizing homilies on the child as symbol of “innocence and trust”. On the contrary, the child represents powerlessness, the “least of the least” in the social order of antiquity, without status or rights.

Jesus is unequivocal: We cannot “receive” him, the one he represents (9:37), or the kingdom itself (10:15) unless we “receive the Child. What is meant by this remarkable challenge? I would suggest that the key lies in understanding the child as the archetypal victim of the primal state of domination, the family. Contemporary psychology increasingly recognises that the “family system” can be a structure of oppression. Children are completely dependent and thus utterly vulnerable to adult power, not only overt abuse but more often subtle forms of manipulation and control. In fact, philosopher-psychotherapist Alice Miller has recently argued that the taproot of social violence lies in the patterns of domination un child-rearing and pedagogy.

24.

Children who are misunderstood, beaten, intimidated or humiliated are not only unable to defend themselves, they have no other choice but to introject their profound sense of betrayal. But when they
become adults, they unconsciously discharge this store of anger upon those around them who are weaker – the prime candidates being their own children. Miller concludes that we cannot hope to break the spiral of violence in the world until we address the intergenerational reproduction of domination in the most basic social unit. It is for this reason that Jesus predicates the possibility of realising the new order of the Kingdom upon acceptance of the humanity and integrity of the child.

If we cannot project our compulsion for power upon the weak, the next logical target is to channel it into resentment against “outsiders”. In 9:38-41 the theme of acceptance is further extended: the Christian community is not to be exclusivist and has no “corner” on the practice of justice and compassion. The practice of liberation must be welcomed wherever it occurs; those “not against us are for us” (9:40). Jesus understands the relationship between the power of monopoly and the monopoly of power.

The struggle between belief and unbelief runs through the heart of the Church, and Mark reserves his hardest words for those who “scandalise” the “little ones” (9:42), another allusion to the sower parable (4:17). Again water and fire (9:43, 48) symbolise the torment of apostasy (see Is.66:24).

Mark seems to be combining Paul’s metaphor of the community as “body” (see “hand, eye, foot” in 1 Cor.12:1-4-26) with Paul’s principle of not causing the “weaker member” to stumble (see Rom. 14). Above all, community solidarity must be preserved; salt bespeaks of the need to close the “wounds” in the body (9:49-50) and also represents the covenant (Num. 18:19). The vocation of peacemaking and reconciliation must begin within the household of faith (9:50). Mark next turns to another kind of internal rift, the problem of divorce (10:1-12).

TO CLOSE THE SECOND CYCLE, Mark narrates the only discipleship rejection story in the gospel (10:17-30). The structure of the episode reveals its central concern: a rich man’s question about eternal life (10:17); the fact he is unable to leave his possessions and follow Jesus’ teaching, and the disciples’ reaction (10:23-27); the disciples have left their possessions and followed (10:28); and the answer to the eternal life question is given to them (10:30). Here the first-last antithesis (10:31) is being further defined in terms of economic class and privilege.

The action begins with the man flattering Jesus (‘Good Teacher’), hoping for a return compliment, which Jesus flatly refuses (10:17-18). It seems odd that Jesus’ response simply quotes from the Decalogue (10:19f). However, a closer reading reveals that he has added a command not found there: “Do not defraud”, a term which elsewhere refers to economic exploitation (Deut. 24:14). Jesus does not dispute the man’s improbable contention that he has indeed “kept the whole law” (10:20). Rather he decides to reveal the truth with the demand that he sell his assets and give the proceeds to the poor (10:21).

The man’s piety collapses – he was not prepared to make such a drastic change – and he walks away dejected. Mark explains “for he had a lot of property” (22). In the class structure of Palestine, the great landowners systematically defrauded the poor; the man was not “blameless” at all, and repentance meant concrete restitution and justice (Note: can it be said that this apparently likeable young man was in fact a thief – and one of the worst kind?). Mark wants the reader to know that this story means exactly what it says and therefore he has Jesus drive the point home by repeating, twice, how difficult it is for the affluent to enter the Kingdom, to the double astonishment of the disciples (10:23-26).

Mark’s joke about the camel and needle (10:25) has inevitably been twisted by commentators anxious to avoid its sting, the most infamous attempt being the mediaeval assertion that there was a small gate in Jerusalem which camels could only enter “on their knees”. In fact the image was intended to denote an impossibility; Mark’s dry sarcasm is better reflected in Frederick Buccner’s contemporary paraphrase that it is easier for wealthy north Americans to enter the Kingdom ”than for Nelson Rockefeller to get through the night deposit slot of the First National City Bank”!
The disciples’ consternation (“who then can be saved?”) is a reflection of the dominant ideology of their time, not unlike that prevailing in American piety, which dictated that wealth was a sure sign of God's favour. (Note: “The Gospel of Prosperity”? Discuss). Jesus turns this notion on its head teaching that the rich can only be saved by redistributing their fraudulent wealth. He then points to the “possible impossibility” of a genuinely new social order based upon economic justice (10:28).

Jesus concludes by pointing to the model of economic sharing in which the discipleship community has been tutored (10:29). The “hundredfold yield” of the gathered assets of the new “family” represents the realisation of the “harvest” promised in the parable of the sower (4:20) not in the hereafter but “in this time.” This new economic model, a community of production and consumption, re-enacts the miracle of multiplication through sharing, first narrated in the earlier wilderness feedings.

With characteristic realism, Mark adds that this practice of economic sharing will invite “persecutions”. This has certainly been experienced in our time by those who have struggled against the economic gain of affluent America – even if the struggles arise more from the internalized demons of capitalist culture than from official opposition. But it is to those trying to respond to the vision of justice that the promise of “eternal life” is made.

THE THIRD AND LAST CYCLE again begins “on the way”, at last revealed as the way to Jerusalem (10:32). The final portent is the most specific in its anticipation of the Passion drama. The Son of Man will be “delivered” by his community to the Sanhedrin, then to the Roman authorities, and then, after ridicule and torture, to death (10:33). Again Jesus promises that “after three days he will rise”, the meaning of which remains a mystery to the disciples (9:10). Do they yet comprehend the Way? The final episode of the catechism demonstrates that they do not, as Mark’s caricature turns bleak.

As did Peter (8:32) and John (9:38), James now joins in the rejection of Jesus’ Way (10:35); Mark has implicated the whole inner circle! They still look forward to some Messianic coup d’etat and aspire to first and second Cabinet positions in the new regime (10:37; see Ps. 110:1). Since he has just taught them about the renunciation of power, we can feel our Lord’s exasperation. In characteristic fashion, he turns the question back on them: Can they embrace his “baptism” and “cup” (10:38)? Within the symbolics of the story, these refer to the way of the cross, and Mark cannot resist sarcasm. No problem, answer the Zebedee boys…

In the Messianic order, Jesus wearily explains, leadership is not established executively; it arises only from an apprenticeship in the Way of the Cross (10:39f). Mark’s caustic tone peaks in Jesus’ teaching: “You know how it is among the so-called ruling class; they practice domination, the tyranny of the elite. But this is not to be so among you!” (10:42f). Which is to say the disciples truly do not know what they are talking about (10:38).

Jesus’ utter repudiation of “politics as usual” concludes with a last antithesis (10:43f). The way to greatness is service and servanthood, and from the beginning of ark’s gospel (1:31) to its end (15:41), only women are described as demonstrating this quality. In a patriarchal system it may be that only women are fit to exercise leadership! And to be “first” is to be a “slave”, a final allusion to the prophetic script (12:2,4). This way is embodied by the Son of Man who will give his life to “redeem” the faithful slave (10:45).

The catechism is summarised by the final healing episode, which takes place in the outskirts of Jerusalem “on the way” (10:46). The rich young man walked away from the call to discipleship because he was possessed by his possessions. In contrast, Bartimaeus, the poor beggar, takes the initiative (10:47f) and readily abandons what little he has (casting away his cloak which was spread out to receive alms, 10:50). In contrast to the disciples, the blind man requests only his “vision” and with this faith “follows Jesus on the way” (10:52). The first have become last, and the last first.
Our Lord’s “catechism of the cross” dramatically reveals the two kinds of power that are in conflict in our hearts, our families, our communities, and our world. Christ’s way stipulates that the primal structures of domination can only be overthrown by the practice of personal and political nonviolence, “from the crib to the courtroom.” This way contradicts all our orthodox notions of social and economic security, and it has been profoundly difficult to accept by Jesus’s followers throughout Christian history.

But the logic of domination has been played out, and in our world we face its ultimatums. As residents of an imperial culture that routinely imposes crosses upon the poor, it is time we “take up our cross”, start thinking “outside the box” (metanoia) understanding that there is a different way; things don’t need to be like this despite what we have been told since childhood; and learn to pray with more than just words, solicit Jesus that we receive His Spirit never to lose sight of His Vision, forever practicing the way of simple nonviolence.

THE LESSON OF THE FIG-TREE

“Whoever says to this mountain...” (Mark 11:23)
“From the fig-tree learn the parable...” (13:28)

Jesus’ long march to Jerusalem, during which he instructed his followers in the way of the cross and non-violence, takes Mark’s story from the margins of Palestinian society to its centre. Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem (11:1) not as a reverent pilgrim coming to demonstrate his allegiance to the Temple-State but as a subversive prophet challenging the foundations of State power. This is Jesus second campaign of direct action. In the Galilean campaign (1:20-3:35), Jesus confronted the dominant order with his powerful symbolic actions of exorcism and healing. Now Mark narrates Jesus’ showdown with the Temple itself and its stewards, the Jerusalem clerical establishment. Like the first, this campaign will cause polarisation and rift, and culminate with Jesus’ withdrawal to reflect further upon the Messianic mission (13:1f; see 4:1f).

Mark 11: 1 – 12:17

Beginning the parade “near the mount of olives” (11:1) brought to mind the final apocalyptic battle between Israel and its enemies spoken of by Zechariah (14:1-5). Moreover, it recalled the victorious military procession of Simon Maccabaeus, the great guerilla general who liberated Palestine from Hellenist rule some two centuries before, according to 1 Maccabees 13:51. Simon entered Jerusalem “with praise and palm branches…and with hymns and songs”. Mark uses these images of popular messianic ideology, which equate national liberation with the rehabilitation of the Davidic Temple-State, precisely in order to subvert them. This is accomplished by the odd story of the “commandeering” of the colt, which constitutes half of the parade narrative (11:2-6). Mark is consciously reorganizing the symbolics of this parade around another Zecharian image that is expressly anti-military. The liberator of Zion comes “meek, riding upon an ass” (Zech. h. 9:9f). This king, who has already disassociated himself from Hellenistic power politics (10:42), enters Jerusalem quite unarmed, as befits a “non-violent siege”. And when this Messiah finally appears in the Temple, it is not to defend but to disrupt.

The composition of the famous “temple cleansing” is another Marcan “sandwich”: the action in the Sanctuary (11:15-19) is framed by the curious tale of Jesus cursing the fig-tree (11:12-14; 20-25). The brilliant symbolism of the latter interprets the dramatic feat of the former, which we will look at first.
Jesus could hardly have been surprised or indignant at the existence of this market-place per se, as some suggest. The modern reader must understand that such commercial activity was an entirely normal aspect of any cult in antiquity. Indeed, the Temple was Jerusalem’s dominant economic institution, upon which most of the City depended. The issue for Jesus was rather the political economy of the cultus. The highly profitable temple commercial interests were controlled by the high-priestly families; even the conservative Josephus referred to the high priest Ananias (47-55 CE) as “the great procurer of money.”

Jesus singles out two street-level representatives of these financial powers: “money-changers” and “pigeon sellers”. The money changers presided over currency exchange and transaction (Greek or Roman money brought in by pilgrims had to be converted into Jewish or Tyrian coin before Temple dues and tithes could be paid). With revenues pouring into cosmopolitan Jerusalem from Jews all over the Mediterranean world, such banking interests wielded considerable power. The pigeon sellers trafficked in the staple commodity by which the poor met their cultic obligations. It is true that many rabbis of the time acknowledged that cultic demands were especially hard on the poor and in some cases tried to ease the burden by advocating lower prices and subsidies. Jesus, however, is not interested in reforming the purity system, he has already repudiated it for the marginalisation of lepers (1:40-45) and women (5:25-34). The cultus only compounds this exploitation by demanding that second-class citizens make reparation for their inferior social status. Jesus rejects the entire system – symbolized by the “overturning” (the verb can also mean to “destroy”) the stations used for both victimizing and profiteering.

Mark then reports that Jesus “forbade anyone to carry any ‘goods’ [pertaining to cult operations] through the Temple” (11:16), suggesting some kind of barricade or ban on further activities for that day. Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus really accomplished this feat? After all, Jewish security police and a Roman garrison stood close by to protect the orderly function of the Temple; hence some argue that what Mark reports could only have been accomplished through forceful action. But Mark is narrating symbolic action: we are told only that “business as usual” was somehow disrupted, with no report of any clash as such. Perhaps it must suffice to say that Jesus “shut down” the Temple – no more (and no less) than a modern nonviolent blockade “shuts down” the Pentagon, or the fall of a Ploughshares hammer on a missile “disarms” the war machine. That is, symbolic direct action at a concrete political site signals an intent toward an end. The eventual demise of these institutions will be accomplished in God’s time, but this assumes the ongoing militant non-violent resistance of God’s people.

Jesus’ bold action obviously required strong justification, and this is forthcoming in his “teaching”, which cites two great prophetic traditions (11:17). Jesus first appeals to Isaiah’s vision of what the Temple ought to represent: a refuge for all peoples (Is.56:7), especially the foreigner and dispossessed (56:3, 6). The “house of prayer” on the “holy mountain” is to be a place of joy for the “outcasts of Israel” and “others besides those already gathered” (Is.56:7-8). But Jesus then invokes Jeremiah to illustrate what the Temple has in fact become. The metaphor “den of thieves” comes from one of the bitterest attacks upon the Temple-State in Hebrew prophecy (Jer. 7:11). This oracle warns against “trysting in these deceptive words., “This is the Temple of the Lord” and insists that the legitimacy of the cult is contingent upon justice toward the alien, the orphan, the widow, and the innocent (Jer. 7:4-7). If idolatry and exploitation flourish, the temple will be destroyed as was its predecessor (7:9-15). To Mark’s Jesus, this ultimatum now obtains and he will shortly give an object lesson about how the Temple exploits the poor.

We return now to the symbolic discourse of the Fig-Tree. On his way into Jerusalem, Jesus curses a tree which is unable to relieve his “hunger”, because it is not the “time” for figs (11:13). The next day, after the Temple action, the disciples find that this tree has withered “to its roots” (11:20). In the semantic background of the OT, the fig-tree was a symbol of peace, security and prosperity in Israel’s past, present and future salvation history. The blossoming of the fig tree was a metaphor for the visitation of blessing on the people of God; conversely, the withering of the tree or its fruit was tantamount to judgment (see Jer. 8:13; Is. 28:3f; Micah 7:1; Joel 1:7,12).
Above all, Mark seems to have had in mind Hosea’s judgment oracle: “Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of my house...All their princes are rebels... Their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit” (Hos. 9:15f). Jesus’ curse, then, is a political parable: the “princes” who profit from the “house” must be “driven out”, “fruitless”; the Temple-State is destined not for restoration but will “dry up”. But the Temple represented the very heart of the social order, what could take its place in the life of the people?

The universal conviction in antiquity held that the deity resided in the temple; to reject the “residence” was to provoke a fundamental crisis regarding God’s presence in the world and the collective identity of the nation. Thus Jesus immediately exhorts his followers to “Believe in God!” (11:23), the God who is not captive to the dominant order. The following sayings urge them to reconstruct their collective symbolic life apart from the Temple-State; faith is a matter of social and political imagination (11:22-25).

The two solemn sayings declare that God’s creative presence and activity to change the world depend upon such faith. What does Jesus mean by the mysterious “mountain” saying (11:23)? The Temple was known as the “mountain of the house”, echoing Isaiah’s promise that “every mountain will be made low” (Is.40:4). Jesus is assuring his followers that the Temple-State is not invincible. To be “taken up and cast into the sea” recalls the symbolic action taken by which Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac (5:9-13). As impossible as it may seem, the Powers of colonial Palestine, represented by the Roman legion, and the Jewish “mountain” will meet their demise.

It is incumbent upon the community not only to pray for the transformation of the world, but to believe it can be done and act accordingly (11:24). So Jesus concludes here with the central petition of what Matthew and Luke know as the Lord’s Prayer (11:25; see Matt. 6:12, 14; Luke 11:23). The house of prayer now abandoned, Jesus offers a new symbolic centre, not an institutional but a moral site: the practice of mutual forgiveness within the community. This is Jesus’ final rejection of the temple-based debt system; the community of faith aspires to be truly a “priesthood of all believers”, and hence a place “for all peoples”. But the history of the churches has proven that it is exceedingly difficult to maintain this practice of forgiveness at the heart of its life.

Jesus’ direct action in the Temple fulfills Malachi’s apocalyptic promise, to which Mark alluded at the beginning (1:2) of his story:

“I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...I will be a swift witness against...those who oppress...the widow, the orphan...the sojourner...You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me” (Mal.3:1, 5, 9).

The “messenger” (John the Baptist) did come, preparing the way for a “stronger one” (1:6f), who on behalf of God did visit the temple. But because the hearts of the leaders had “hardened” (3:5), because they had turned the house into a “den of robbers” (11:17), he pronounced not blessing but curse (11:21) and took “swift witness” against an oppressive system through nonviolent direct action. This puts flesh on Jesus’ earlier “strong man” and “divided house” parables (3:24-27). Jesus has put a ban on the strongman’s “goods”, for the “house” that is divided is the Temple, its vocation betrayed by a political economy of exploitation; it “cannot stand.”

None of this is lost on the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy, which understands that Jesus must go but is constrained from acting against him by fear of the unpredictable political allegiances of the masses (11:18; see 12:12; 14:1). Mark now turns to a series of conflict stories between Jesus and the political power structure itself. In three interrelated episodes, he repudiates both parties of the Jewish-Roman colonial joint
rule in Palestine: the argument over John’s baptism (11:27-33); the parable of the vineyard (12:1f); and the dispute over Caesar’s coin (12:13-17).

Jesus’ thinly veiled parable of the vineyard is clearly allegorical. The “vineyard” image, taken from Isaiah 5, was a popular symbol for Israel, “fenced around by the Law” as the rabbis were fond of saying (12:1). The “lease to tenants” however is Mark’s little parody. His readers knew the Jewish ruling class also as the absentee-landlord class; they could thus revel in the role reversal of Mark’s story, which portrayed reactionary leaders as rebellious tenants! In their greed, they not only mismanage the vineyard but conspire to own and control it - the antithesis of the original covenant ideology of gift and grace.

This parable indicts the ruling class in the murder of all those who have advocated the prophetic vision of Justice. Hence their opposition to Jesus (and, before him, John) is not the exception but the rule, it is a systemic problem. The violence and counter-violence are true to Isaiah’s despairing cry: “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel... The Lord looked for justice, but, behold, bloodshed” (Is.5:7). In conclusion, Mark cites Psalm 118:22 (“The very stone which the builders rejected”) further underlining the conflict between the Messianic mission and the would-be “builders” of the Temple-State (12:10f).

On Either Side of this parable are two conflict stories identical in structure. In each case Jesus is approached by opponents who challenge him regarding the question of political authority (11:27f; 12:13-15). Jesus in turn poses a counter-question, in which he forces his antagonists to first state their own loyalties according to the fundamental opposition between divine and human authority: “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from humans?” (11:30) and “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (12:17). Jesus’ actions have made his allegiance clear; now it is up to the listeners to decide theirs. In the baptism dispute, Jesus aligns himself with John in order to expose how the Jewish overlords have betrayed their popular mandate. The leaders cannot eulogise the martyr, because they surely had consented to his murder (see 6:17f); neither can they publicly denounce him because of his enormous popularity (11:31f). This, of course, is precisely their dilemma concerning Jesus; thus when they equivocate, Jesus walks away. But as just noted, the vineyard parable makes clear the true official policy towards prophetic dissidence.

Jesus’ tax-dictum (12-17) has been the long-standing object of misinterpretation by those who would impose a “two-kingdom” doctrine upon it. As the rhetorical parallel with the baptism episode shows, the issue is not one of compatibility between the claims of God and Caesar, but conflict. During the time in which Mark wrote, the late days of the Jewish revolt, the question of whether or not to pay tribute to Rome divided true Jewish nationalists from collaborators. This episode is thus analogous to the historical situation of Mark’s Galilean community, whose opponents (as here, Pharisees and Herodians) tried to “entrap” it according to this “test” (12:13, 15).

“Do we pay it, or don’t we?” (12:15). As far as Jesus is concerned, the question is not his but theirs; he forces them to own up to their collaboration by producing a coin. The image and inscription this coin bears become the centre of the story (12:16). The image alone might have sufficed to settle the matter, since no true Jewish patriot (or Christian) would have used such idolatrous currency. (The revolutionary provisional government in Palestine minted its own coins). But Mark is particularly concerned with the inscription which would have extolled Caesar as the “August and Divine Son”. The word “inscription” appears only one other time in Mark, the writ of conviction posted over the cross (the divine “Son”) at the end of the story, which will read “King of the Jews” (15:26).

The choice between rival authorities could scarcely be stated more sharply. There are simply no exegetical grounds for reading this famous “render” statement as an exhortation to pay the tax. Jesus, who

does not himself carry the coin, escapes the trap by challenging his antagonists to reveal their own political allegiances. It is this, not a neat doctrine of obedient citizenship, that provokes their incredulity.
Having Repudiated the Hegemony of the colonial arrangement, Jesus is now attacked by its ideological architects, the scribal class. The first sortie involves the Sadducees, the most (theologically) conservative of the ruling groups (12:18-27). They intend to object to the doctrine of resurrection from the dead, that hope of radical eschatological transformation for which they, wealthy and privileged in this life, have no use. Ridiculing Jesus, they apply the rabbinic logic of reductio ad absurdum to a practice of which they approve – Levirate marriage (12:19-23). But Jesus diverts the issue from the alleged moral chaos in the afterlife to the assumed social practice, which objectifies women.

Sadducean support for levirate marriage was concerned with the perpetuation of the patriarchal family system, in which the woman’s status is restricted to childbearing, and offspring secure inheritance for the household estate. Against this crude materialism of class succession and an instrumental attitude toward women, Jesus asserts the vision of a wholly new world in which patriarchy is overthrown: the woman will not ‘belong’ to any of the men, because all are equal in status ‘like angels’ (12:25). His otherwise strange closing argument now makes sense: The blessing of posterity given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will not be guaranteed by structures of (male) domination but by the power of the God of life (12:26f).

Jesus then further undermines the hermeneutical authority of the ruling class as he goes on the offensive against the scribes (12:34b). He begins by finally addressing the issue of Davidic messianism directly (12:35-37). Here, “sonship” has nothing to do with genealogy, but with ideology. The ruling classes assumed that Messiah would act to restore the Davidic Temple-State to its full autonomy and power, which would aggrandize their position still further. But, citing Psalm 110, Jesus argues that Messiah is not beholden to the old Davidic dreams of a renewed imperial project, since the politics of domination is itself the problem (see 10:37-45, where the allusion to “right-hand” also derives from Ps.110).

Jesus now instructs the crowd in critical thinking, warning them against the pretence of the scribes (as he did regarding the Pharisees and Herodians in 8:15). Mark’s unsparring caricature of lawyers and ideologues portrays them solely as concerned with the maintenance of their social status and privilege – the antithesis of Jesus’ call to be the “last” and “servant” (12:38f; see 10:43f). These are harsh words, but they get harsher. Scribal affluence is attributed to “devouring widows’ houses under the pretext of long prayers” (12:40). This probably refers to the practice of legal trusteeship, in which the estates of deceased men were given to scribes to administer – the widow deemed unfit to run a man’s affairs. In compensation, the trustee received a percentage, and embezzlement and abuse were not uncommon. Thus Jesus is again criticising piety as a mask for robbery.

This is confirmed by the final temple episode concerning the widow in which Jesus gives a lesson in exploitation (12:41-44). His comments have long since been trivialised as a quaint commendation of the superior piety of the poor, when in fact they are better a lament. Jesus sits “opposite” the treasury (12:41), the same stance he will shortly take toward the whole temple building as he utters judgement (13:3). Ever class-conscious, Mark again points to the contrast between the large contributions placed in the till by the rich and the meager offerings of the poor (12:42). The widow is broken by her tithing obligation – “she has put in everything, her whole means”. The temple, like the scribal class, no longer protects the poor and widowed, but crushes them (‘voraciously’). His attack on the political economy and its stewards complete, Jesus exits the temple grounds for the last time, in disgust (13:1-2).

There is an intentional symmetry between the disciples’ awe at the temple edifice Jesus has just repudiated (“Teacher, look!” 13:1) and their earlier surprise at the cursed fig-tree (“Master, look!” 11:21).
with terrified questions about the end of the world (13:4). This paves the way for Jesus’ second great sermon, which alludes to Mark’s own historical moment: the Jewish revolt of 66-70AD. To those Jews who owed their allegiance to the Temple-State, the terrible social and political upheaval of the war with Rome indeed portended the end; but from Mark’s perspective, it represented the possibility of a new beginning (13:7f).

Radically critical of both imperialists and nationalists, Mark’s community refused to cooperate either with the Jewish guerrillas or the Roman counter-insurgency, a “non-aligned” stance which earned it persecution from both sides of the war (13:19-13). With the siege of Jerusalem imminent (13:14a), rebel recruiters were going throughout Palestine exhorting patriotic Jews to the City’s defence. Only one voice could compete with their persuasive call to arms – the voice of the Master, Jesus. This voice reiterated the counsel of the prophet Daniel who, two centuries earlier during the Maccabean revolt, had urged the faithful to resist both the imperial beast and the allusions of militant nationalism (Dan 7-11). Jesus calls for an abandonment of Jerusalem (13:14b-20) not because of cowardice but because of the apocalyptic conviction that the true order of justice cannot be established by the sword.

Mark’s apocalyptic vision looks for the end, not the mere recycling, of the politics of violence and domination. The second half of the sermon, in the language of high apocalyptic symbolism, speaks of the “true signs” of this end. The Powers will be pulled from their heavenly thrones only by the greater, non-violent, power of the Son of Man (13:24-27). At the end of the story, this Power will be witnessed by the Powers and some of the disciples (see 8:38f; 14:62) – the true apocalyptic moment when the sun darkens and the power of the powers is broken: Jesus on a Roman cross (15:33).

The sermon ends with two parables. Returning to the fig-tree image, Mark argues that the leafy (i.e. fruitless) fig-tree is a sign of the “end-time” (13:28-32), which is to say, the world of the oppressive Temple-State is coming to an end. Though we do not know when, we have been told how and reminded by the second parable, in which Jesus commands us to stay awake and watch (13:32-37). These imperatives will reappear in Gethsemane (14:32, 41).

In the apocalyptic parable of the householder, the “Son of Man” who claimed lordship over the debt-system that oppressed the poor (2:10, 38) is not revealed as the true “lord of the house” (13:35). The world has become Gethsemane: all disciples are called to “historical insomnia” in the struggle to overturn the reign of the powers with the way of non-violence.

Mark’s second campaign narrative speaks poignantly to those struggling to resist the “house rules” of Imperial America. We are socialised to be obedient consumers, cooperative in the face of militarism and economic exploitation, and, above all, to be politically impotent. Against this, the gospel endorses militant, nonviolent action against the most formidable ‘mountains’ and calls us to careful discernment of the ‘end-time’ (13:1f).
We now arrive at the tragic denouement, and surprise ending, of the story. Known as the “Passion Narrative”, it is an intensely political drama, filled with conspiratorial back-room deals and covert action, judicial manipulation and prisoner exchanges, torture and summary execution. Unfortunately, these raw themes tend to be suppressed by traditional theological interpretations and pious liturgical reproductions of “Holy Week” - perhaps because these themes are so from comfortably persistent in the political culture of our modern national security states. Yet we cannot understand the hope this story bears unless we come to terms with its tragedy.

Here Mark’s double plot-line converges. On the one hand, Jesus’ alienation from the authorities, who strenuously oppose his kingdom practice of justice and compassion, reaches its consequence: arrest. On the other, the inability of Jesus’ own disciples to understand and embrace his Way – a crisis Mark equates with “blindness” – reaches its logical conclusion: desertion.

Mark 14

In Jesus’ second apocalyptic sermon (13:3-37), Mark had suspended the narrative time and space in order to invite us to consider a vision of the world in which the powers are toppled by the Son of Man (13:24-27), we are exhorted to be “ever vigilant” for that moment (32-37), which Mark now re-enters the “real world” to narrate. That moment will catch us, like the disciples, off-guard. In 14:1 we are plunged back into the heart of Jewish time and space: Jerusalem during the high holy days of Passover. These feast days always occasioned political turmoil in colonial Palestine under the Romans, for it was a time when Jews reflected on the great Exodus story of liberation. So it is that Mark reintroduces the government conspiracy against Jesus in the context of official concern to keep public order (14:2).

Mark begins his Passion narrative with two stories which present Jesus as the messianic king: an anointing (14:3-9) and a banquet (14:17-25). Each prepares the reader for the tragic turn the story is about to take, in which the king does not, as was envisioned by patriotic Jews, lead them to military triumph, but rather is defeated.

In an episode that again illustrates the least becoming great, it is a woman who takes the prophetic action of anointing Jesus’ head (14:3; see 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:12f). This act is singularly commendable (14:9) because she, unlike the (still “blind”) disciples, is not avoiding but anticipating the Way of the Cross and its consequences. The authorities then decide to go undercover, recruiting Judas (14:10f), a strategy intelligible only if Jesus’ community has itself gone underground. This is precisely the impression we get from the elaborate instructions given by Jesus to his disciples in 14:12-16: a “runner” leads the fugitive community through the city to a “safe house”. There, in an attic, they will celebrate the feast in the manner of the first Passover: eating “as those in flight” (Ex.12:11).

From the outset this banquet is fraught with anxiety, as Jesus announces that he is aware of the infiltration (14:18), understanding the seriousness of the breach of trust in his allusion to the lament of Psalm 41:9. The community reacts with self-doubt, their solidarity beginning to unravel. The condemnation aimed at Judas, under lucrative contract as an agent (14:21), is a sobering reminder of Jesus’ earlier warning: “At what price can one buy back his true self?” (8:37).

Despite all this, Jesus proceeds to affirm his solidarity with these betrayal-bound companions. As he did for the masses in the wilderness (6:41; 8:6), Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, but this time offers it specifically to the disciples (14:22). So, too, he passes the cup, in Mark a symbol for suffering at the hands of the Powers (compare 10:39; 14:36). The extraordinary meaning of this ceremony lies in Jesus’ interpretation, which he offers in lieu of the traditional Passover homily following the meal. Jesus boldly applies the
elements of the meal not to the Exodus story but to himself (14:22, 24). Instead of the traditional eating of lamb, Jesus portrays himself as the “Paschal Lamb” (Ex. 12), who renews the “blood of the covenant” in his death (Ex. 24:8).

The Messianic banquet radically subverts the temple-based feast of Passover, for Jesus has already repudiated the Temple-State (13:1f). It expropriates the central cultic myth-ritual of the nation in order to narrate a new centre for salvation history: the one who gives his life for the people. Jesus then announces that the feast has become a fast – until justice should reign (14:25, compare 2:21f). He has overturned the last stronghold of the dominant socio-symbolic authority; in place of official cultus, he offers his “body” – that is, messianic practice in life and death. This implied opposition of temple and body will become explicit in Mark’s execution narrative.

The Tragic Story Line now approaches its climax in a rapidly escalating series of defections. After the Messianic Banquet, Jesus turns to his disciples and says simply “You will all fall away” (14:27). He again appeals to Zechariah’s shepherd parable (alluded to earlier in 6:34), in which the prophet, despairing over Israel’s corrupt leadership, himself becomes “the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slain for those who trafficked in sheep” (Zech. 11:7).

As we have come to expect, this dark portent is immediately refuted by Peter (14:29). But as surely as he sets himself apart as the exception, Jesus counters that he, Peter, above all will characterise the desertion (14:30). Peter’s vehement protestations of loyalty only deepen the tragedy, for his actions will utterly contradict his words. “They all said the same” says Mark, stressing the whole community’s complicity in the delusion. But the worst is yet to come. Remarkably, Jesus calls one last time for solidarity from his inner circle, withdrawing to pray (14:32f). The strong language of Jesus’ inner turmoil (33) is meant to make clear that he is encountering his destiny not with contemplative detachment, but with genuine human terror. There is no romance in martyrdom – only in martyrologies.

Citing the psalmist’s depressive lament (Ps.42:6) Jesus concedes to his friends that he is profoundly shaken, and he exhorts them to “watch” (14:34). His petitions (13:35) make it clear that the “hour” spoken of in the apocalyptic parable (13:32-37) is drawing near. Can the disciples stay awake? They cannot: Mark underscores it three times. Peter earns one more rebuke (14:37f); the one who just a little earlier was boasting of his strength does not have the strength (compare 5:4; 9:18) to wrestle with the forces of temptation (compare 1:13; 8:11; 12:15). Prayer is again revealed as the struggle to face both the demons within and the darkness of the historical moment (see 9:28) in order to summon the courage to go (and stay on) the Way of the Cross.

The disciples’ eyes remain heavy (blind) as the Hour arrives (14:41). With the narrative teetering on the verge of collapse, Jesus turns to face the music that has been playing in the background since the very beginning of his ministry. The dialectic of intimacy and betrayal that has laced the Passion narrative climaxes in Judas’ embrace, and Jesus is seized (14:45f).

The Arrest Scene, it must be said, reeks of the overkill so characteristic of covert state operations against civilian dissidents. The secret signal, the surprise ambush in the dead of night, the heavily armed escort, the instructions for utmost security measures – all imply that the authorities expected armed resistance (14:43f). Mark’s tone, however, condemns not the bystander who does skirmish with the police (14:47), but the sordid character of the whole operation, which provokes the very violence it purports to prevent.

Jesus sarcastically remarks, “So you have come to arrest me with swords and clubs as if I were a robber?” (14:48). The reference is to the activity of social banditry in the Palestinian countryside under colonial rule in which peasant leaders formed guerilla bands to harass their oppressors in a manner later associated with Robin Hood or Pancho Villa. Jesus (who will in fact be executed between two such
robbers – 15:27) taunts his captors with the fact that their ambush only unmasks their political weakness: “Every day I was among you in the temple, and you didn’t dare seize me!” (14:49).

Jesus then calls upon a higher and deeper Authority, the “script” of biblical radicalism (14:49; compare 9:12f). It is this script the Authorities cannot understand (12:10, 24) and that the disciples cannot follow. It now dawns on the disciples that Jesus does not intend to abandon this script, and they flee for their lives (14:50). The sheep have scattered, and the discipleship narrative has come to a grinding halt. Yet, just as the reader buckles under the weight of this ignominious end, Mark throws us a life-line. He has woven into his narrative two hints of a reversal. The first came in 14:28, when Jesus turned to Ezekiel’s version of the shepherd parable, which spoke not only of scattering but also regathering (Ez. 34:11f). Jesus insists that, despite the debacle, the journey will continue – a promise we must recall when we come to the end of the story.

Less apparent, but of equal importance for understanding Mark’s surprise ending, is the curious parenthetical comment about the young man who flees with the other disciples, leaving behind a linen cloth (14:51). As will become clear in Mark’s second epilogue, the young man fleeing naked symbolises the shame of the discipleship community, leaving behind the garment which will become Jesus’ burial wrap. This young man, however, will reappear by Jesus’ empty tomb, fully clothed in white robes (16:5). We shall see that this exchange of clothes, as in Jesus’ transfiguration (9:3f), represents both a promise and a challenge to the reader. But at this point, all we know is that everything has gone sour. The discipleship community, as has so often been the case in the history of the Church, has bailed out at the first occasion of conflict with the authorities, its dreams of a new order shattered by the brute force of state power. Jesus, now alone, goes to stand before a kangaroo court with no hope of justice. There his final struggle with the Powers will be played out.

Mark’s Trial Narrative, it has often been argued, intends to place culpability for Jesus’ death squarely on the shoulders of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. Such a reading, however, apart from being a traditional fountainhead for Christian anti-semitism, is suspect on both literary and historical grounds. In occupied Palestine the Jewish colonial government did not have jurisdiction over matters of capital punishment; these had to be turned over to Rome. Our extra-biblical sources make it clear that Pontius Pilate was one of the most ruthless of the Roman procurators; there are no historical grounds for believing that he was in any way intimidated by the Jewish leadership. And we must explain why Mark records a change in the charge against Jesus, from blasphemy (14:64) to sedition (15:2), such that he was crucified, a punishment reserved only for those convicted of insurrectionary activity.

A literary analysis of Mark’s account reveals that he has constructed a careful parallelism between Jesus two “trials”. Both proceed along the same lines: interrogation, “consultation”, and mockery-torture. In each case the interrogation consists of two prosecutorial challenges. On the one hand, Jesus refuses to respond to the charges against him (14:60f; 15:4f); on the other, he returns the sarcasm when his character is impugned:

High Priest: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?”
Jesus: “Am I?” (14:61f) (Note: I am not aware of any other writer turning this into a question and think the author may have overstepped his mark here).

Pilate: “You are the king of the Jews?”
Jesus: “You say so.” (15:2)

A “consultative verdict” then follows. In the first hearing, the high priest secures the Sanhedrin’s approval of a blasphemy conviction (14:63f); on the second, Pilate “confers” with the crowd, which returns a
death sentence (15:6-15). Finally, Jesus is subjected to ridicule and torture, the common fate of all political prisoners (14:65; 15:16-20).

The double trial strongly suggests that Mark wished to portray the Jewish and Roman powers as fully cooperative in their railroading of Jesus, whom they perceived as a threat to their joint hegemony. Indeed, there are strong elements of political parody in his grimly comic caricature of these proceedings. The highest Jewish court throws out due process in favour of a rigged hearing. Though they are unsuccessful in coordinating the testimony of hired perjurers, the council’s fabricated charge does, in fact, accurately reflect their case against Jesus. His repudiation of the Temple-State poses a threat to the oppressive system they uphold (14:55-59).

Jesus makes no attempt to refute the charges because he understands this is a political trial in which legal arguments are gratuitous. In the end, he convicts himself by his subversive confession of the apocalyptic Son of Man (14:62), who has already been revealed in the gospel not only as the one who defies the symbolic order (2:10, 28), but the one who will overthrow the Powers (13:26). Fully conscious of the irony, Mark portrays Pilate as the one who correctly identifies the issue as one of political authority (15:2). But his sardonic ‘king of the Jews’ (as compared to ‘King of Israel’, see 15:32), the title given to Roman client-rulers such as Herod) is a contemptuous reminder that the Jewish people are not sovereign in their own land.

Mark’s Pilate is a sketch of procuratorial pragmatism at work. In a shrewd public relations ploy aimed at playing the crowd’s patriotism off against itself, he grants amnesty to a convicted terrorist - (Barabbas) in order to keep Jesus – a deal he would strike only because he understood the latter to be the greater political threat. The cruel ridicule by Pilate’s security forces makes the parody complete. Jesus is dressed up in a Roman military cloak and a laurel wreath, symbolizing the very militarism and imperialism he has resisted (15:16-20). The fickle masses are also part of the farce. They go in a matter of days from hearing gladly Jesus’ criticism of the elite (11:38) to being manipulated by them into lobbying for his demise. Because it is historically inconceivable that Jews would ever have called for the crucifixion of one of their own, it is suggested that Mark is satirising the Roman Coliseum tradition, in which the crowd was given the choice as to whether a wounded gladiator (usually a prisoner of war or condemned criminal) should live or die. In this scene the “sheep without a shepherd” (6:34) are caught between the conflicting revolutionary claims of the urban guerilla Barabbas and the Galilean “Messiah” Jesus. It is, of course, only a contrived choice, for in fact those mediating the contest hold actual power and have no intention of giving it up. The tragedy is that the masses again succumb to the will of their political and class masters (who fear them! 14:2); as a result the status quo – which is to say their domination – remains intact (15:11).

Nor are the disciples spared, for sandwiched between the two trials is the bitterly pathetic cameo of Peter’s denial (14:66-72). It is clear that Mark’s Passion narrative means to be a dramatic enactment of the central paradox of the gospel. To save one’s life is to lose it (8:35). Peter represents disciples whose instincts for self-preservation overcome the call for self-denial (8:34), just as Judas (14:10f) represents those who “sell out” (8:38). Only Jesus is unashamed of the Son of Man. The time has come to take up the cross.

A Story That Began heralding a way through the wilderness (1:2f) now ends tragically, on the way of the cross. In Mark’s time it could scarcely have been farther from the religious icon it is today. To restive imperial subjects, it conjured the fate awaiting those who dared challenge Caesar’s sovereignty. To civil-ized Hellenists, it was a form of punishment so inhumane that Cicero once urged that it be “banished from the body and life of Roman citizens.” But to Jesus it symbolised the call to and cost of discipleship (“Sonship”). And in Mark’s account, it is portrayed as the great Apocalyptic Moment in which the Powers are overthrown and the world comes to an end.
Jesus is marched, in the grand tradition of Roman conquest, to the site of execution (15:21-23). His clothes are divided (15:24), the first of three allusions to the great Psalm of Lament (Ps. 22:18). He is nailed up at the third hour (the first of Mark’s three watches of the cross), and left to asphyxiate (5:25).

Gathered at Golgotha as on a tableau are representatives of the whole spectrum of Palestinian politics: the Jewish leadership, the Roman military, guerilla rebels, the non-committed bystanders, even a few disciples, watching in horror from afar. And here, at the climax to his story, Mark switches to the historical present tense, drawing the reader into the drama, as if to ask us where we ourselves stand.

For is there not a part of us in each character here? A part that, like the male disciples, is wholly absent from this spectacle, having long ago abandoned Jesus at the first whiff of confrontation? Or a part that, like the women, can only hold a vigil, incredulous and numb with sorrow? Or a part, like Jesus’ detractors, that joins in the protest against this ending? “Who indeed can believe” (Ps. 53:1) that things have turned out this way? Do we not also long for Elijah to perform an 11th hour rescue (15:35f), that the story might come out right? Indeed, we might legitimately approach this cross with all those who have dared to hope for a better world – especially those who have been crushed struggling for a justice that seems forever deferred – and demand an explanation. For who among us is prepared to accept that this is the way to liberation?

Jesus is ridiculed by all (15:27-31), yet there is an ironic imploring tone to the taunt that he save himself. Even his opponents desire a less ignominious end to this tragedy. The thirst for last minute intervention leads them finally to conjure one up: Jesus’ gasp of anguish (15:34; see Ps. 22:7f) is misinterpreted as a desperate petition to Elijah, the eschatological prophet who, they believed, would rescue Israel from judgment (see Mal.4:5f). Indeed, their plaintive cry is the pitiful culmination to the struggle for faith that has characterised Mark’s story. If only Jesus would come down from that cross so that we might all see and believe (15:32)! Yet this is the moment in which our “blindness” will be most consequential, for to understand what happens next – the climax to Mark’s apocalyptic war of myths – truly requires eyes to see (4:12; 8:18; 10:51).

From the Sixth to the Ninth Hour, the sun is darkened (15:33), a sign that recalls when God blotted out the sun for three days over Egypt to aid Moses in his struggle against Pharaoh’s imperial order, which was legitimised by the sun god, Ra. But here it symbolises the unravelling of the whole cosmic order of domination as promised by Jesus: “The sun will be darkened... and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming with great power...” (13:24f).

We may recall that Jesus had three times portended his death at the hands of the authorities (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). But he also spoke three times about the advent of the Son of Man, and in each case promised the listener that they would see this moment (8:38f; 13:26f; 14:62). Sure enough, Mark has gathered these same witnesses around the cross: the crowd, the authorities, the disciples. But what do they – what do we – see? Is it Jesus defeated, end of story? Or is it the Son of Man revealed, end of world – that is, of the world over which the Powers preside?

To help us, Mark gives a second, more specific and unmistakable, sign. As Jesus’ body expires in a great death rattle, Mark reports that the Temple curtain is rent in two (15:37f). This sign confirms the fundamental conflict between Jesus’ “body” (symbol of the Messianic community in practice, 14:22) and the “sanctuary made with hands” (the legal, cultic, and political system of oppression), to which his opponents had unwittingly testified (14:58). The subversion of the dominant order legitimised by the Temple-State is now complete.

The aftermath of Jesus’ death provides no immediate evidence that anything has changed. Contrary to traditional interpretation, neither the so-call great confession of the centurion (15:39) nor the alleged
mercy of the council member Joseph of Arimathea (15:42-46) can be considered discipleship stories. The Roman soldier remains in his role, which is merely to confirm the criminal’s death (15:44). His utterance must be considered rather in line with the demons and political opponents, who are forever trying to control Jesus by naming him (1:24; 3:11; 5:7; 6:3; 14:61). In Mark it is only the divine voice that provides a reliable witness to Jesus as “Son” (1:11; 9:7), but at the cross that voice is conspicuously silent (15:34).

Similarly, Joseph’s mission is to beg the body from Pilate (evidence of how firmly in control of events the Procurator was), not out of compassion but in order that the corpse not profane the Sabbath. Joseph hastily wraps Jesus’ body (in the linen cloth of betrayal, see 14:51) and puts it in a tomb disdaining even the most rudimentary obligations of a proper Jewish burial. Like the Romans, the stewards of the Sabbath seem to have had the last word over the Lord of the Sabbath.

It appears, then, that the dominant social order has prevailed after all. It was not Elijah who took Jesus from the cross but the Sanhedrin. The rolling of the stone over the tomb symbolically closes the story (15:46). Jesus is dead, the Powers have taken over the narrative; the disciples have fled and only a few women are left.

We have arrived at the second epilogue, where, as in 8:11-21, Markan symbolics reach their resolution. The Kingdom narrative has collapsed, but again Mark throws us a life-line. He shifts the focus to certain women who had “followed Jesus and served him” from Galilee to Jerusalem (16:40). Unlike the male disciples, they have understood the vocation of service and hence were able to endure the cross. In the background, throughout the story, the women suddenly emerge here as the true disciples, offering us a glimmer of hope.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (a counterpart to the male “inner-circle” of Peter, James, and John) re-open the story (6:1-4) in their attempt to salvage some dignity by reburying Jesus. Joseph’s actions are reversed. They buy spices, go to the tomb to properly anoint the Master’s body, and find the stone rolled away. So the story is not closed…

The inertia of the tragic ending is now turned around. Jesus is not where the authorities had placed him. They had believed that this sordid episode had at last been laid to rest (16:6). Failing to find Jesus’ body, the women instead encounter a mysterious “young man” (16:5), and the apocalyptic symbolics proliferate. He is “sitting at the right”, the place of true authority, which the male disciples had coveted (10:37; see 12:36; 14:62). And he is “dressed in a white robe”, the apparel of martyrdom (9:3; compare Rev. 7:9,13). The women are deeply disturbed to discover from him that the Nazarene – titled the “crucified one”, the only legitimate discipleship confession – has gone (16:50). The young man then issues what is the third and last call to discipleship (16:7; compare 1:17; 8:34).

Mark’s resurrection tradition offers no visions of glory or triumph, only the promise that Jesus is still on the road, and that we can see him again in Galilee. And where is Galilee? It is the place where “the disciples and Peter” were first called to follow Jesus. Which is to say, the discipleship narrative is beginning again. The story is circular!

The women bolt in fear. But, throughout the gospel, trepidation has accompanied those who journey with Jesus across seas of conflict (4:41; 6:50) and up to Jerusalem (9:32; 10:32). But this last passage is the most fearful of all, for a martyr figure beckons them (and us) to start afresh – this time fully conscious of the cost.

What an ambiguous ending! It leaves us not with a neat resolution but a terrible ultimatum: we can see the Risen Christ only on the way of discipleship. From earliest times this has troubled readers of this
gospel, leading to several attempts to append “happier” conclusions, with a more definitely triumphal resurrection. But the genius of Mark’s “incomplete” ending lies precisely in the fact that it demands a response from the reader. The story of discipleship continues, and we cannot remain mere spectators.

Isaiah once promised that God would “destroy on this mountain the net that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations” (Is. 25:7). According to Mark, that time arrived in the life and practice of Jesus of Nazareth. Writing in the midst of terrific pressures and suffering generated by the Jewish-Roman war (66–70AD), Mark also understood his own historical situation clearly and, with Jesus as his compass, took his stand.

Mark’s Jesus repudiated the legitimacy of both the Jewish ruling elite (both religious and temporal) and the Imperial oppression of Rome. His economic and political critique was sharp and specific, and it demanded that social reconstruction start from the bottom up. Jesus’ vision of inclusiveness and equality questioned all forms of political and personal domination.

This Jesus called for a revolution of means as well as ends, enjoining his followers to a practice of militant nonviolence and its consequences. Above all he relied on the “contradiction of the cross” – life given, not taken – as the only power that could remove the “veil” maintained by the Powers over the nations.

Mark’s gospel was, and remains today, a manifesto for radical discipleship. In our world, Isaiah’s “net over all peoples” has become a noose, and the deadly logic of domination is pushing history into a cul-de-sac. Do we Christians believe Mark’s story enough to assume an equally clear stand in this Hour? We too are called to row against the choppy waves and storms of class and race oppression (6:48), to “give the hungry something to eat” (6:37), and to preach and cast out demons (3:14f). It is up to us to carry on Jesus’ challenge to the “mountains” (11:23) of institutionalised violence and injustice today.

Will we respond to this call? If we are honest, we will admit that the Cross is so intimidating, and our blindness so pervasive, that we can only answer “We believe; help us in our unbelief!” (9:24). We are somewhere between the young man who flees naked and the young man clothed in martyr’s garb. Even our best efforts at faithfulness inevitably seem to founder upon betrayal and desertion – our own, and that of our friends (and churches). But all this is part of the story, too. Indeed, it is at the point of facing not only death but the less ultimate tragedies of failure and disillusionment that the call comes again. It is then that our discipleship journey, like Mark’s story, either truly ends or truly begins.