

The Gospel of Mark (2)

Jesus' Galilean Ministry

Parables.

In the pages of the New Testament we can see two very different ways of answering the question "Who is Jesus?" The Gospel writers, including Mark, answer the question by giving us "snapshots" of Jesus in action. They recount incidents in Jesus' ministry, accounts of healings and controversy for example. The other way of dealing with the question is seen in the writings of Paul. Paul had been very influenced by Greek thought and debate, so he answers the question in theological terms with abstract ideas and logical arguments.

These two ways of answering the question aren't just about personal ways of dealing with the issue. The Gospel writers were, like Jesus himself, easterners. To this day the tradition of storytelling is used in the Middle East to explain deep truths. It is a very different way of answering the question compared with Paul's complex arguments.

Jesus himself was a storyteller. Among the stories he told are those we know as Parables. In a Parable the storyteller is comparing like with like. Many of them begin with the words "The Kingdom of God is like....." and then go on to compare it with something from people's everyday experience.

The Kingdom of God:

When we think of a kingdom we think of a country with set borders, a government and a central organisation or structure. At the time of Jesus that was unknown. Back then a king's (or queen's) rule extended only as far as their power or influence spread - the area they controlled.

The idea of the Kingdom of God had developed in the two hundred years before Jesus. The Jews longed for a time of God's rule which would bring in an everlasting time of peace and justice. Mark, as a believer in the death resurrection of Jesus, believed that God's Kingdom had come. But he also knew that God's rule was being impeded by human sin; greed, selfishness and self importance. Mark portrays this as part of his "secret". Some people said that, because they were in a suffering world, God's Kingdom must lie in the future. Mark wants to emphasise that it was here already. Others said that the Kingdom of God was for only the chosen few. Mark says that it is for everyone who wants it. For Mark the Kingdom is here but, for a variety of reasons, not everyone has embraced it's rule.

Mark's Parables

Mark records 17 parables in his Gospel. Matthew and Luke record many more. Most of Mark's parables are short and just two are extended. The latter are the Parable of the Sower (beginning at Chapter 4 verse 3) and The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard (beginning at Chapter 12 verse 1). Mark uses the latter to illustrate the conflict Jesus met when he arrived in Jerusalem. But for now we will concentrate on the Galilean ministry.

People sometimes think of Parables as just being about how to behave. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is in Luke but not Mark, is a good example. So often

preachers will stress that it tells us to be compassionate to those in need. That isn't its main message. The main message is about who our neighbour is. It's a challenge for us to cross boundaries of suspicion and hate, such as the one that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

Mark Chapter 4: A chapter of parables

Five of the Parables that Mark recalls are in Chapter 4. These are the Parables of the Sower (vv 3 - 20), of the Light under a Bowl (21 - 23), of the Generous Measure (vv 24, 25), of the Growing Seed (vv 26 - 29) and the Mustard Seed (vv 30 - 32)

The first of these, the Parable of the Sower, is the longest and is also the only one that is explained. The disciples ask for an explanation. Jesus answer seems odd:

"You have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God. But the others, who are on the outside, hear all things by means of parables, so that, 'They may look and look, yet not see; they may listen and listen, yet not understand. For if they did, they would turn to God, and he would forgive them'". (Mark 4 .11 - 12)

Mark seems to be saying that, while the disciples are allowed to hear things plainly, others have to have things told in parables. He seems to be depicting Jesus as hiding the truth.

It is likely that this is Mark's technique of explain the difficulty of understanding who Jesus was. In other words it's part of his "secret". We have trouble understanding some of the parables because, like many of Mark's hearers in Rome, we are from the western world where logic and explanation are our way of thinking. In all likelihood those who originally heard Jesus tell the parables understood exactly what he was saying. But Mark is using the "literary device" of a story to explain something else. His agenda is to explain why everyone didn't simply get up and follow Jesus. The "Messianic Secret" again!

Mark is saying "You have to think about this" and "Accepting God's rule will involve you changing your life around!" Superficial people wouldn't take time to think it through. The message of the Kingdom of God, Mark says, is there for all to hear - but people need to make the commitment to listen. If they do the "secret" will be theirs to know.

In reality a Parable is an illustrative story that helps the hearer to understand. Far away from the eastern home of the parable Mark is able to use them more as riddles, preserving the purpose of Jesus for those "in the know".

One Parable - Two meanings

With any parable, as with much else in the Gospels, we need to remember that there are two contexts. Firstly we have to ask ourselves "What did the parable mean when Jesus originally told it?" Then we have to ask "What does it mean for Mark and his audience thirty years later?" The two are not necessarily the same.

Look at the Parable of the Sower. Read just vv 3 - 9. It's full of Good News. A farmer doesn't worry that some seed will fail to grow. The harvest is good; thirty, sixty or a hundred fold! Jesus says God's Kingdom is here, ready for harvest. But when we read the explanation in vv 13 - 20 there's an emphasis on the wasted seed. It's wasted because of all the things that have impeded the Gospel in Mark's day; troubles and persecution (v17), love for riches etc (v19). The Word of God has not born fruit in everyone.