

Proper 24 Year B 2024

We only have a few more Sundays left in the church year in which we will read from Mark's Gospel... so before we start a new lectionary year, this Advent, which will be the Gospel of Luke, let's again recollect what the Gospel of Mark is all about. It is helpful, at least for me, to stop along the way and look at the big picture of the particular Gospel within which we are reading. The goal of course is to put into an overarching context these short enigmatic readings, whose meaning on their own, in isolation, often make little sense.

So you will remember that Mark's gospel is chiefly about the mission and ministry of the Baptized. The gospel begins in dramatic fashion with the Baptism of Jesus, tipping us off that baptism will be the principal theme of this spare and incisive rhetoric. The writer invokes the prophet Isaiah speaking of the return of the Judean exiles from Babylon back into their homeland. So this mission according to Mark has profound historical significance, on a par with the repatriation of the people of Israel from captivity; that one of the chief aims of the baptized is the freedom of God's people. And if we don't at first get the point, Mark goes on to say that at the baptism of Jesus the heavens are torn apart. This mission then has cosmic significance in the mind of the writer. A radical change, not just in society, but a change in God's world as well. So, suffice it to say that for Mark, the stakes couldn't be higher. Baptism, for

Mark, is an initiation into a way of life, a way of life that has far reaching implications for the whole of society in which the initiate lives and moves.

And immediately... that frequently occurring word in Mark... Immediately Jesus is cast out into the desert... for forty days, we are told. Of course, that is an allusion to the forty years in the Sinai desert spent by the newly freed Israelites from the oppression of the Pharaoh in Egypt. Again, a reference to freedom... but an excruciating journey lies ahead nonetheless... a journey of trials, of danger, of duplicity, of doubt. We are told that Jesus is tested by Satan... We have been taught that this means that Jesus is then tempted by the devil to sin... but remember, Mark's invocation of the figure of Satan is a reference to the emperor... so this trial in the desert has to do with Jesus, that is... the baptized, contending with the oppression of Imperial power, and moreover, the seduction of power. So in the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, the writer draws a contrast between the mission and ministry of the people of God up and against the evils of empire, the evils of worldly power. For Mark that is the test. It is, in short, a test of allegiance. Another way to put it is this: Will we, the baptized, the initiates into the Jesus Movement, acquiesce to the ways of power, the ways of sin and death, or will we choose Love, the way of compassion, empathy, and justice. The problem, since recorded history, is power.

Remember, sin in New Testament literature, is not so much about the little things we do; our missing the mark; our falling short; our bad personal choices. Sin

for the New Testament writer is structural. Sin is Power for its own sake, and it wreaks the most havoc when institutionalized in the status quo. In the ancient world the most obvious example is the vast gulf between rich and poor; the powerful and the powerless; the free and the enslaved; the well-to-do and the untouchable. Those realities are structural. They are social, economic and political... institutionalized; and that is where sin is nurtured; and that is where sin can do the most harm. That is the sin from which we must repent. In our confession that we say most Sundays, we say "forgive us for the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." That is speaking of structural sin.

The structure of Mark's gospel is simple really. It begins with the proclamation of the Good News at Jesus' Baptism... Good news that freedom is embodied in the love of neighbor... and then the narrative moves inevitably to Jesus' arrest and torture and death. In fact the entire last third of this gospel is the account of Jesus' arrest, and mock trial, and execution: a grotesque representation of what corrupt power can do to the innocent among us. As always violence is the means of power. The first two thirds of this gospel are teachings as to what we can do in the face of such evil, in the meantime, if you will: Welcome the stranger, take care of the widow and orphan, take care of the mentally ill, heal the sick, bear each other's burdens, take care first of the marginalized among us; grant dignity where there is shame.

These are acts of Love that according to Mark will subvert the evil of our world. And the stakes are high in earth as in heaven... because without Love all is lost.

So we've been hearing all about this for the last several weeks: Jesus has acted out his own teaching; he has healed demoniacs, and people with diseases; He's confronted, albeit reluctantly, the racism of his own culture by healing the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter; he's brought peace of mind where there is despair... he has welcomed the marginalized... and then he spends a lot of time talking about wealth and power... and what great stumbling blocks they are... stumbling blocks to Love... and, in Mark, unlike the other Gospels, the disciples never catch on... nobody catches on, except perhaps the women at the empty tomb. I think Mark's hope is that we'll catch on; that one day there will be an audience that catches on.

In our narrative today two disciples are asking Jesus to do for them just what he's been telling them to guard against over the last two chapters. This is the second time the disciples begin arguing over power... who is the greatest? Who can sit at the right and left hand of Jesus. They are so caught up in their world... the world of might making right; a world shaped by violence, or the threat of it; a world seduced by the false promises of power and wealth... and then Jesus says to his disciples... in what I interpret as Mark's plea with us and all who would hear his words...., "It is not so among you." And it is not just a plea, but it is an affirmation of the goodness at the heart of our humanity.... Jesus tells them, "you know, the corrupt and powerful

enslaved to greed become tyrants... but you're not like that." He is calling them, and calling us to our true selves, calling us out of the trance induced by power, and its myriad distractions.

Things are no different now... Just look at what our world is like today.... We are seeing, perhaps more than ever because of technology and media... we are seeing power out of control; or perhaps better said, power in control.... We are witnessing power become tyranny. In the name of democracy... Our government, federal and state, on our behalf is abusing immigrants and their children fleeing violence that comes with poverty; our government on our behalf is intentionally widening the gap between rich and poor. Our government on our behalf has compromised environmental laws that would protect the sustainability of our planet. Our government on our behalf is actively suppressing the right to vote, and creating loopholes in the election laws whereby fair elections may be stolen. Our government allows the legal ownership of weapons of mass murder. Our government, on our behalf, as we speak, is funding the genocide in Gaza It is not so among you!

Everyone it seems these days is talking about the great divide in our culture; that we don't bother to listen to the opinions and standpoints of the other objectively... But to me, that is not the great divide... the great divide is between the self-interested powerful of our world; up and against human conscience... It has come down yet again to what Mark the Evangelist told us centuries ago. The divide is

between Love and what Love can do in our world... and power, either having it, or wanting it, or wanting more of it; the divide is between self-interest and sacrifice; the divide is between bondage and freedom; the divide is between being excluded or embraced... the divide, in short, is between falsehood and truth....and brothers and sisters I have no patience to listen anymore to the arguments that come from self-satisfied elitism and racism, and sexism, and ageism. As best as I can... I choose love... because Love insists on the truth... and we, good people belong to the truth.

Jesus speaks of himself in this gospel as a ransom for many. In our modern English vocabulary that word evokes extortion... you know paying a ransom, dirty money, to get what one wants... But ransom in the ancient world had to do with purchasing the freedom of a slave... We are baptized into the same baptism as Jesus of Nazareth... We, my brother and sisters, are a ransom for many. We are here to purchase with our lives and labor the freedom and dignity of our brothers and sisters who lack freedom and dignity. We are to bring home the exiles from the untouchable margins of existence. That means, now more than ever, we are counter-cultural. We belong to Love. We belong to the truth. Our manifest destiny is not to be served, but to serve. We don't acquiesce to a so-called new normal. We are not seduced by the sirens' song of power. We are not lulled into the false comfort of self-reliance; and the idolatry of the individual.... We are not seduced by the metastatic greed of the world.... It is not so among us. It is not so among us.