

Mark 1:32-45: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 1 verses 32 to 45. And those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, Everyone is looking for you.

And he said to them, Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out. And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

And a leper came to him, imploring him and kneeling, said to him, If you will, you can make me clean. Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will, be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once and said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.

But he went out and began to talk freely about it and to spread the news. So that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

[1 : 34] The end of Mark 1 continues the sequence of healings and exorcisms begun on the Sabbath morning in Capernaum in verse 21. After the exorcism of the demoniac in the synagogue, there is the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, followed by more general healings of the sick and deliverance of those oppressed by demons after sundown.

The healings and the exorcisms at sundown occurred after the Sabbath day had ended. And although Jesus heals many and casts out demons, this doesn't seem to be the central purpose of his ministry, and he doesn't seem to go out of his way looking for the sick and the demon-possessed.

Rather, such healings and exorcisms testify to the central purpose of his ministry, are proclaiming and teaching concerning the kingdom of God. He is the talk of Capernaum, and all who are sick and in need from demon oppression are brought to him.

As an aside at this point, demonic possession is not something that's discussed a lot in the Old Testament, but it seems to be all over the place in the Gospels and later on in the Book of Acts. We should not presume that demonic oppression is a uniform phenomenon, found everywhere to the same degree and in the same way. Rather, it seems to vary from society to society, and as the word of Christ goes throughout a society, it seems to be less prevalent, or God can hold it at bay.

[2 : 53] At other points, it's something that is far more widespread within a society. So we should not be surprised to find that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, there is great conflict with demonic oppression, with Satan in the wilderness.

This is a society that's oppressed by demonic forces in a particular way. The description of Jesus healing many is not to be taken as a suggestion that Jesus lacked the power to heal all, although perhaps there were too many there for him to heal them all on that occasion.

The main point, though, is that Jesus heals a considerable number of persons. Also, he casts out demons and heals people with various diseases. Jesus isn't selective in the sorts of ailments that he heals, and as we proceed through the Gospel, we'll see there's a great number of different kinds of afflictions that are healed by him.

And Jesus here forbids the demon to speak, because they know who he is, in verse 34. Here we see what some have called the messianic secret, the way in which Jesus hid his identity during his public earthly ministry, and revealed it only to a few.

It's an important feature of Jesus' ministry in Mark's Gospel in particular, and many have commented upon it. Jesus often discourages people from talking about healings and deliverances, and also silences demons when they're about to declare his identity.

[4 : 14] There are occasions when Jesus displays his work more openly, but it seems for the most part he keeps it largely under wraps. The purpose of the secrecy seems to involve rather more than simply a concern to avoid excessive attention from authorities and the crowds before the proper time, although that may be part of it.

The disciples and the demons have a knowledge about Jesus' identity and mission, for which the time has not yet come for more public disclosure. There is an expiration date, however, upon the secrecy, as we see in Mark 9, verse 9, where the disciples are told not to mention the transfiguration until Christ has risen from the dead.

And part of the purpose of the secrecy seems to be the great openness to misunderstanding that the revelation of Jesus' identity prior to his death and resurrection would provoke. His mission is not what people were expecting from the Messiah, and only in the light of his death and resurrection could its true character and its divergence from typical Jewish expectation be made known.

The point, then, is not to avoid all revelation, but premature revelation. The time will come when the true character of what God is doing in Jesus of Nazareth will be made clearly known, and then what was whispered in secret could be declared from the rooftops.

Verse 35 ends the 24-hour period that began in verse 21. Jesus secretly leaves to a deserted place to pray. Rather than developing a popular movement from Capernaum outwards, he goes from town to town to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, carrying out his mission on his own terms.

[5 : 55] Jesus' mission does not move in predictable ways. It doesn't follow the conventional rules. It doesn't operate in terms of people's expectations or demands. Jesus doesn't give himself over to the crowd, but often retreats from them and moves on.

He recognises, I think, among other things, the fickleness of the crowd, their limited and their mistaken understanding of the nature of his mission, and the danger of them setting the terms of his mission.

Jesus is led by the Spirit. He goes where the Spirit wishes. He doesn't move according to human plans or purposes or the desires of the crowd. There's a real danger, for instance, of becoming a movement defined by a particular region or town, rather than by God's proclamation of his kingdom in the fullness of time, a kingdom that is not limited by locality.

By refusing to give himself to the people of any particular town, Jesus protects his ministry from such distortion. His mission is to proclaim and to establish the gospel of God, and this necessitates moving from place to place.

And one of the things that marks Jesus' ministry is his giving himself to all and resistance to having his ministry claimed and co-opted by any single group and its agenda.

[7 : 12] Simon and those who are with him sought Jesus out at this point, and the description of Simon and the other disciples as Simon and those who are with him highlights the prominence of Simon Peter among the disciples.

We should also consider the fact that Mark is probably resting in large measure upon Peter's own testimony, which might heighten the existing prominence of Peter among the disciples. The problem of publicity is further highlighted in the story of the healing of the leper with which this chapter ends.

Leprosy in scripture is not what we think of as leprosy, which is the condition called Hansen's disease. Rather, it refers to a variety of different skin conditions.

Lepers would generally live away from larger bodies of population, so Jesus probably met this man in a more secluded location. He's moved by pity at the man's plight, and he touches the man, a means by which someone would usually contract impurity from the leper, but by which Jesus communicates wholeness.

Such a healing doesn't merely deliver the leper from a physical ailment, but also from social and physical isolation, so that he can become a member of the wider people again, and become part of the fellowship and the congregation.

[8 : 27] Jesus sternly instructs him not to say anything, and he drives him off. Rather, he must present himself to the priest and go through the prescribed process of cleansing. This suggests that Jesus wants to observe the rules of the law.

Also, that the man is maybe a testimony of the judgment upon the people. Elsewhere, we see the language of proof for them, being used in the sense of proof against them, as evidence of judgment.

The sternness with which Jesus instructs the man has a connotation, a strong connotation of anger. It isn't gentle, and the same thing can be said of the driving off. It's language that elsewhere we can see used of demons.

It's possible that the implied anger relates to the healed lepers' foreseen future actions, as contrary to Jesus' instructions, the leper spreads the news, making it very difficult for Jesus to carry out his mission openly in towns.

Rather, like John the Baptist, he has to minister in the desolate places, outside of areas of human habitation. This is one of the dangers that the messianic secret is designed to guard against, to have Jesus' mission co-opted by people who see the signs, the healings, the exorcisms, and all these great acts, and want Christ to serve them on their terms, and want to create a movement around Christ that is defined not by his mission, but by what they want from him.

[9 : 53] Something to consider. Try to imagine how people at this period in Jesus' ministry would have interpreted his actions, and the sorts of misunderstandings to which they would have been most exposed and vulnerable.

