

Mark 1:14-31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 1 verses 14 to 31 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

Passing alongside the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.

And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending their nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes.

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.

[1 : 1 4] But Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out of him. And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? A new teaching with authority? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.

And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Mark 1, after setting up the ministry of Christ with the baptism of John, begins the ministry of Christ with the handing over of John the Baptist. The same language is later used for Jesus, as he is handed over to the Jews and then the Romans to be crucified.

The arrest of John begins Jesus' Galilean ministry more generally, which takes up the first eight chapters of this book. While John had largely been operative in Judea, Jesus starts off as a Galilean figure in the north of the country.

[2 : 3 0] And Jesus' message concerns the gospel of God, the good news that God is coming to reign. The long-awaited time has come at last, God's promised reign is about to arrive, and people must repent and believe the joyful tidings.

Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus is described as one proclaiming. He is a herald, bearing a message of something about to happen in history. Unlike John, however, he isn't just a forerunner, but he's the one announcing and bringing the expected rule of God.

God is now fulfilling his purpose in their days, and they must be ready, repenting of their sins as a people, and responding faithfully to the proclamation being given to them. Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee, and he calls Simon and Andrew, followed by James and John.

These are the three core disciples, Simon, James and John, with Andrew being the fourth disciple in typical ordering. They're all fishermen from the north of the country, not the most promising material with which to start a religious movement.

And they're beside the Sea of Galilee. As we go through Matthew, Mark and John, they all speak about Galilee as the Sea of Galilee. Luke speaks about it as the Lake of Gennesaret.

[3 : 41] But the Sea of Galilee heightens some of the connotations of the Gentiles and their association with the sea, of the sea as the realm of chaos, as the sea in juxtaposition to the land.

And it's a focal point for Jesus' ministry, particularly in the first half of the Gospel. Jesus' concern with the sea and with fishermen rather than with shepherds suggests there's a movement beyond the land as the focal point for the understanding of the ministry.

In the Old Testament, the leaders of the people were shepherds, but now Jesus calls fishermen. And there's a transition here that should be noted. However, we never read of Jesus visiting Sepphorus or Tiberius, which were the main Hellenistic cities in the region.

Jesus' ministry, although in a region with lots of Gentile and Hellenized populations, is overwhelmingly to Jews. Simon and Andrew, however, have both got Greek names, which suggests that, like other Jews in the area, they had some Hellenistic influences.

Simon is connected to the Hebrew name Simeon, though. They're called to be fishers of men. We've spoken about the Gentiles as fish. The Gentiles, if we go through the Old Testament, are often associated with the fish stories.

[4 : 54] Think of Jonah in particular. In the prophets, the Gentile nations are often described as beasts of the sea, as monsters of the sea, perhaps, or as beasts that arise from the sea.

In Jeremiah chapter 16, verse 16, there is another association, though. In verse 14 following, Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but as the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them.

For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.

God is searching out his people with fishermen, with hunters, and maybe the calling of the disciples here as fishers of men is a returning of Israel after exile theme as well.

Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 19 to 21. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him.

[6 : 13] And he was with the twelve. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him, and he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.

And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him, and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate.

Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. Like Elijah, Jesus calls his disciples when they are engaged in a symbolically important task. We are told the number of oxen that Elisha is associated with, because it is a number associated with Israel, and oxen associated with Israel too.

Likewise, Jesus calling his disciples when they are engaged in the tasks of fishing, suggests that their task is of symbolic importance for their later ministry and mission.

We should continue to hear the recurring word immediately in these accounts. Things are happening quickly, and it isn't just Jesus himself who does things immediately, but those who are called to be his disciples in response to his word.

[7 : 21] It's possible that Mark's liking for the term immediately, especially in this chapter, plays off the quotation in verse 3 of the chapter, and some translations capture something of the relationship between the word immediately and the statement, make his path straight, in the quotation, by using straight way for immediately.

The way of the Lord has to be made straight, and Christ is the one who does everything straight way. John's gospel suggests that these men weren't unknown to Jesus, but were formerly disciples of John, and had already been acquainted with him through John's witness.

Also, James and John were likely Jesus' cousins. As we compare the list of the women at the cross, this seems to follow from that. The reference to their leaving their father behind may also be more than just a bare reporting of what happened.

It can underline something about the character of discipleship, and it contrasts with the actions of Elisha when he is called by Elijah. Jesus then goes to Capernaum, which would be the base for his earliest mission, but now not merely by himself, but accompanied by his disciples.

The next verses recount a series of great works that he performed on a Sabbath morning, afternoon, evening, and then early the following morning. First of all, he teaches in the synagogue in a way that is remarkable for its authority, in contrast to the teaching of the scribes.

[8 : 44] He has earlier been proclaiming the gospel, but now he teaches with authority, which seems to be a somewhat different act. Perhaps by teaching we are supposed to consider something more along the lines of the Sermon on the Mount, which provoked a very similar response from the crowd at the end of it, who also notice the contrast between his authoritative teaching and that of the scribes.

Jesus is one who is teaching and giving instruction concerning the law and what it means to live faithfully in the age of the kingdom, but he's also one who's proclaiming the kingdom and declaring as a herald what's about to take place.

He demonstrates the authority of the word of his teaching, but then that's followed by a demonstration of his powerful word of exorcism as he casts out the demon, who testifies to his true identity as the Holy One of God.

Now that expression, that he's the Holy One of God, possibly has priestly connotations. Jesus has both authority and power, power over evil spirits, and this is a conflict that's being highlighted.

Mark foregrounds Jesus' ministry of exorcism in this and the following verses. Israel is afflicted by demonic possession and Jesus brings relief. Perhaps Jesus is like a new David here.

[9 : 57] After David was anointed by Samuel, he went and offered relief to the evil spirit oppressed Saul, and Jesus is doing the same thing for Israel. Also after David was anointed, Goliath stood against Israel for 40 days before David defeated him.

Jesus in Mark is a performer of great and powerful works, a champion who stands against Satan and who defeats the demons. He goes into the realm of the wilderness, the realm where Satan and his demons had their base of operations, and he goes to their very territory and brings his power there.

As a result of his work, Jesus' fame spreads throughout the region. Maybe we're supposed to remember the story of David again. David is the one who defeats Goliath, and then he wins these great victories against the Philistines and others, and his fame starts to rise at that point and eclipses that of Saul.

Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands. In a similar way, Jesus' reputation is rising. People are hearing about him. They're telling the stories of what he has done.

He is getting a reputation as one who is a champion, one who's able to stand against Satan and his minions. However, even though Jesus' fame is rising, as we'll discover as we go through the Gospel, the crowds do not really understand the nature of Jesus' mission.

[11 : 17] The synagogue exorcism is followed by the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus is someone who heals, both in public and in private, and it's likely that Jesus stayed in the house with Simon and Andrew and their extended family.

It's worth considering the sort of family structure of the society that Jesus was ministering within. It may help us better to appreciate the sort of radical challenge that he presented to it at points, but also some of the ways in which our far more atomised societies are challenged by Christ in their own ways.

Jesus took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, in a way that some have connected with demons leaving people. She then began to serve him.

We might connect her actions to that of the angels, who previously ministered to Jesus in verse 13. We might also see a different sort of call here. Simon, Andrew, James and John followed Christ in the ministry of fishing for men.

But Simon's mother-in-law may be given a different calling here, the calling of ministering to Christ. In Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 3, we see that there were a number of women who ministered to Jesus in various ways, providing for his resources, giving him hospitality, and serving him in various ways.

[12 : 34] If Jesus made Peter's house in Capernaum a base of his operations, Simon's mother-in-law would probably have been his primary hostess, with all of the honour that that involved.

And so I suggest that we see this as a sort of calling to her, as a hostess, that she is being lifted up, she's being raised up, there's resurrection themes here perhaps, and then she is entrusted with the care of Christ.

Jesus is doing all of these things upon the Sabbath. This doesn't yet seem to be provoking controversy, but later on in the Gospel it will. Jesus is highlighting by these actions something about the true nature of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a time of making things whole. The Sabbath is a time of life and restoring things to life. The Sabbath is a time of liberty and setting people free.

And all who would reduce the Sabbath merely to a set of burdensome and onerous commandments are undermining the true purpose of the day that God has given to his people.

[13 : 36] The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. And Jesus, at the very start of his ministry, is acting on a Sabbath in a way that reveals the purpose of the Sabbath.

It reveals something about the sort of rest, the sort of Sabbath, that he is going to give to his people, that his ministry involves at its very heart. A question to consider.

How does Mark's focus upon exorcisms and the conflict with Satan in the wilderness help us better to understand the character of Christ's mission more generally?