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Mark 1:14-20

THESE SEVEN VERSES set the tone for understanding much of the Gospel of Mark. Whoever takes up these verses is dealing with the most compact summary of the gospel and with *the* crucial response for discipleship given by Mark. Preaching on this passage on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany¹ offers the chance to present a most significant Markan manifestation of Jesus as gospel herald with divine authority; he summons disciples and promises them a future role.

The content of these one hundred seventeen Greek words consists of a fifteen-word summary of what Jesus proclaimed and two parallel narratives about the call of two pairs of disciples, Simon and Andrew and then James and John.

In terms of Mark's outline, the three units (1:14-15, 16-18, 19-20) stand at the close of his "prologue" or "preface" and just prior to a connected sequence of events constituting "a (typical) pell-mell day in the ministry of Jesus" (1:21-39). After another miracle story (1:40-45), hard on the heels of the three at 1:23-26, 30-31 and 34, Mark moves into a series of controversy stories, controversies which already point to the cross (2:1—3:6), during the busy days of teaching and healing in Capernaum.

Conventionally, verses 2-8 about John the Baptist, and verses 9-13 about Jesus' baptism by John and the following temptation by Satan are taken as a kind of theological prologue (cf. John 1:1-18). But a good case has been made for including verses 14-15 in this highly theological "initial pericope." Jesus, announced by the Baptizer and in accord with Scripture, is declared God's Son by a voice from heaven; and having bested Satan's attack (a clue to how the passion will come out), appears in Galilee announcing the gospel of God. Verses 16-20 of chapter one are then specimens of response to this extraordinary figure, given before more about his work in Galilee is told.

Structurally it is helpful to arrange Mark's lines so as to indicate flow and parallelisms present in the language. Generally the wording is that of RSV but more literally following the Greek, a few words of which are given. Verse 15 is broken down into subsections and sections preceded by (a) are structural components in the narrative to be discussed below.

1. "Third Sunday in Ordinary Time," according to the Roman *Ordo*.

- 14 And after John was arrested,
 Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God¹⁵ and saying,
 15a “Fulfilled has been the time (*kairos*),
 15b And the kingdom of God has drawn near/is at hand (*ēngiken*).
 15c Repent and
 15d believe in the gospel.”
- 16 (a) And passing by, by the Sea of Galilee,
 (b) he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea;
 for they were fishermen.
- 17 (c) And Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I shall make you become
 ‘fishers of people.’”
- 18 (d) And immediately, having left their nets, they followed him.
- 19 (a) And having gone on a little farther,
 (b) he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother and those in the
 boat, mending their nets.
- 20 (c) And immediately he called them. (d) And having left their father
 Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands, they went away after him.

For a similar “call” story in Mark, compare 2:14. “(a) And passing by, (b) he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. (c) And he says to him, ‘Keep following me.’ (d) And having arisen, he followed him.”

Numerous commentators consider a good deal of verses 14-15 to be Mark’s own work, especially the brief chronological link to the Baptist, the reference to “Galilee,” the kerygmatic language about “preaching (*kēryssōn*) ‘the gospel of God,’” and even the four-line summary of Jesus’ kerygma. But while some of the phrases do reflect Hellenistic Christian missionary terminology (e.g., “the gospel about God” as preaching of monotheism), other expressions (like “repent”) are of good Palestinian provenance and were language Jesus employed (“the kingdom of God”), rooted in apocalyptic eschatology (“the ‘right time’ in God’s plan has come”). Most recently there is a tendency to take 1:2-15 as pre-Markan redaction.

Verses 16-18 and 19-20 have been termed “Petrine stories” by those who sense Simon’s own reminiscences here; “biographical apophthegms” by form critics; and “narratives about a call” (cf. I Kings 19:19-21). There are some differences in the two stories, but a basic outline is clear:

(1) *The situation*: (a) a participial phrase, bringing Jesus on the scene (in v. 16 the reference of [the Sea of] Galilee may be a redacted link to v. 14); (b) Jesus “saw” (same verb in both accounts and in 2:14) the potential disciple(s) at some phase of his/their daily work (always expressed through a participle and prepositional phrase). The explanatory phrase in 1:16, “for they were fishermen,” is necessary to prepare for the promised vocation as “fishermen of people.”

(2) *Jesus' call*: (c) He summons them. The wording of 1:17 happens to be verbatim that of II Kings 6:19, but the context there when Elisha directs a Syrian army into the hands of the king of Israel is quite different. "Come" is a common Greek imperative found in Mark (*deute* at 6:31, 12:7). It is in the singular (*deupo*) at 10:21, "Come, keep on following me." "After me" (*opisō mou*) is found at 8:34. Compare 1:20*b*. In 1:20*a* it says simply, "He called them," but a powerful verb that is. Chapter 2, verse 14 uses a present imperative from the significant term for "follow-as-a-disciple," also employed at 1:18. The exact wording of the call thus varies. Only 1:17 adds the specific promise about future vocation.

(3) *The utterness and immediacy of response*: each narrative ends, like a miracle story, with a statement about the result—a participle, as in 1:18 and 20, "leaving behind" livelihood and/or father with employees which is perhaps an illustration of what it meant to "turn in a new direction" or to "repent," (1:15), and then a main verb describing how they followed after him.

There is enough similarity that we may say Mark has employed traditional accounts that had become stylized in the telling, a telling with an eye to encouraging discipleship and missionary vocation in the early church, and maybe to recall the start of the vocation of certain apostles. There are differences that can suggest remembrances of actual circumstances. Mark has added little (perhaps his favorite word "immediately" in 20) and places the material well after his opening pericope (1: 2-15).

We may now go back for some details in earlier verses of the passage. It is significant that in verse 14 the verb "John was arrested" (RSV) is part of a pattern using *paradidōmi* ("arrest, hand over") and *kēryssō* ("preach"):

John the Baptist appeared "preaching" (1:4) and now has been arrested (1:14);

Jesus came "preaching" (1:14) and will be "handed over" (9:31, 10:33, *paradidōmi*), arrested (14:43-49);

the disciples, it is implied, are to preach (cf. 13:10) and will be in some cases "delivered up" (*paradidōmi*) to the authorities.

Our pericope gives us the beginning of the end for John in this pattern (see 6:17-29 for John's martyrdom), the beginning of the beginning of Jesus' work of preaching and being martyred, and the first glimpse of disciples who are also to reflect such a pattern.

Verse 14*b* describes Jesus' proclamation as "the gospel of God." That can mean good tidings about God or from God, such as the early church in Mark's own day preached (Rom. 1:1; 15:16; I Peter 4:17). Here it is defined by a four-line summary of Jesus' message about God's reign or kingly rule. The first two lines are in the indicative mood, statements about what God is doing; the

last two are imperatives or commands, to be exhibited eventually in disciples like Simon and his fellows and those to whom they shall preach and for whom they “fish.” It would be true to say for the historical Jesus, according to many who have worked on what his message was, that within an eschatological framework the Kingdom is drawing nigh, so close that at times he spoke of it as present. But Mark has presented his summary in two parallel statements which seem to mean that “the Moment in God’s design *is* fulfilled because the kingdom *has made* its arrival”—in Galilee—according to the Gospel Mark is writing.

But, then, what does “Galilee” mean? It is for Mark not simply the place of resurrection appearances.² It is the place where Jesus appeared, the place of his activity, the “turf” where Christianity finds its “roots,” the land where “the gospel” originated, from whence the mission goes forth across the Sea (of Galilee)—on that Sea as a “bridge” to Gentile mission.³ Indeed, in this “prologue” we may even have a clue to that cryptic ending of Mark at 16:8. The tomb is empty; Jesus, of course, lives as Christ and Son of God (1:1, 11), the victor (1:12-13); and his kerygma has now become, in the church, the gospel to be proclaimed by disciples who heed his call. He who in Galilee proclaimed the gospel is now present in the gospel his disciples preach.

It would be easy to pick out attractive “themes” in our verses for preaching. “The kingdom of God,” including its Markan aspect as “life” (cf. 9:43, 45, 47), deserves attention. The initiative and charismatic authority of Jesus stand out. Unlike a rabbi, whose pupils seek him out, Jesus takes the lead. There is no psychological motivation for people to follow him, just his message (1:15) and person (1:9-13). There is the important promise in 1:17. “Fishers” had been used by Jeremiah as a word (along with “hunters”) for those whom Yahweh would send to ferret out evil-doers in Israel; “men-fishers” was a terrible word of judgment. But at Mark 1:17 “fishing for people” promises soteriological activity. Perhaps its use is a reversal of Old Testament meaning like “come after me” (1:17; cf. II Kings 6:19). It is too imaginative to assume 1:17 is a phrase from a “sermon,” delivered by Jesus after his baptism using the Jeremiah text plus Ezekiel 47:9-10. There is, however, a Matthean parable which develops both the salvific and judgmental aspects of men fishing (13:34-48); and the Gospel of Thomas 8 represents a gnosticizing development. It might also be noted how revolutionary Mark was in beginning his historic account by telling of a *carpenter*-preacher (6:3) and some *fishermen*; no Roman would write thus about “nobodies” made to “feel like somebodies.”⁴

2. Cf. 16:7; 14:28. The ingenious reference of these verses to the parousia has not stood the test of critical examination.

3. Cf. 5:1, 21; 6:47, 48, 53; 7:31.

4. Donald W. Shriver, Jr., and Karl A. Ostrom, *Is There Hope for the City?* (Philadelphia,

But lectionary preaching is not picking out “themes” that interest us. It is not even to focus just on Jesus’ kerygma or just on one or both of the “call stories.” Attractive as the scheme might be, we are not, if the fullness of 1:14-20 is to be developed, to concentrate on “the disciples” who respond to Jesus’ call.⁵

If the unit is 1:14-20, then the summation of this pericope must run something like this: When Jesus announces God’s gospel, “The *kairos*—fulfilled, the kingdom—near,” then the response called for is “About face, believe the good news, come after me,” as four fishermen do, who receive the promise that Jesus will make them his “fishers for persons.” Gospel, response, promise—Simon, Andrew, James, and John began with it in Galilee and ever since then all disciples carry the gospeling process on, by hearing and “fishing.”

The lectionary employs Jonah 3:1-5, 10 as an analogue of “call,” proclamation of “repentance,” and the effect of preaching God’s word.⁶

In terms of preaching on Mark, 1:1-8 has been read in the B cycle on Advent 2, 1:9-11 on Epiphany 1, and 1:12-15 will be heard on Lent 1. Epiphany 4 begins an in-sequence reading of 1:21 and following as far as 3:6, and after Markan readings on Lent 2, Passion Sunday, and Easter Vigil, “the year of St. Mark” picks up with 4:35 and following on Pentecost 5. Our passage gives a chance to put all these readings into perspective by getting straight on Jesus’ basic proclamation and on discipleship.

Finally, calendrically, if Epiphany is about “manifestations” of Jesus, Son of God in his power and authority, then our lesson is of a piece with the epiphany at his baptism (Mark 1:9-11) and the call of Philip and Nathanael (John 1:43-51),⁷ for Jesus’ kerygma and call of the four fishermen (Mark 1:14-20) and his ensuing miracles and words are manifestations of the “new teaching with authority” (1:21-28, 29-39, 40-45; 2:1-17, 18-22, 23—3:6). In this setting the

Westminster Press, 1977), p. 40, citing Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1957), on the uniqueness of Mark on this score within the writings of his time.

5. That is a subject to be preached on some time, preferably with a text like 1:16-20. These verses, incidentally, already suggest that, opaque and bumbling as the disciples are in Mark, they are not ultimately “heretics” or a disguise for some group against which Mark polemicalizes. They are “learners” who have a lot to learn, in contrast to but actually, from Jesus; yet even so, they can be paradigms for the community in some things.

6. That the epistle for the day from I Corinthians 7 is eschatological, vs. 29-31, or mentions God’s “calling,” vs. 17-23, is happenstance from the general thematic unity of scripture and should not be pressed to fit in with the gospel and Old Testament lessons.

7. The *Ordo* appoints John 1:35-42, the Johannine version of the call of Andrew and Simon from being disciples of the Baptist to follow Jesus in Judea (sans nets or “fishers-of-men” promise in the Fourth Gospel). Not only is it confusing thus to read the differing Johannine and Markan versions of the call of Andrew and Simon on consecutive Sundays, but to end at v. 42 disrupts the succession of christological titles in John 1: 36-51 (so Gerard S. Sloyan, *Commentary on the New Lectionary* [New York, Paulist Press, 1975], p. 172). The Episcopal and Lutheran lectionaries have therefore appointed 1:43-51, using in Year A John 1:29-41 when the *Ordo* has simply 1:29-34.



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