INTRODUCTION



SESSION 1

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Mark 10:45

Jesus, the Suffering Servant (Part 2)

ark's gospel is written to help his readers answer two basic questions: Who is Jesus? and What does it mean to be his disciple? The first half of the gospel focused on the question of Jesus' identity, but it left that question open-ended. The second half of the gospel will focus on the question of discipleship, which began in the first half and will intensify as the gospel continues. The two questions are interrelated. An understanding of discipleship requires a clear and correct understanding of Jesus. The more a person is able to understand the meaning of Jesus' life, the more that person is able to understand what it means to follow him as a disciple.

Mark's development of the meaning of discipleship and how best to follow Jesus can be explored on three levels when reading the gospel: first, what Jesus teaches those who follow him about discipleship; second, what Mark teaches his community three or four decades later about discipleship; and, third, what the gospel of Mark teaches us today about discipleship. The experience of following Jesus is not a once-only event for the original disciples. Everyone can come to understand who Jesus is by experiencing him through the inspired word of Mark's gospel and so come to understand what it means to be his disciple. Our response to Jesus is part of the continuing story of the gospel.

Mark's interest in discipleship pervades the entire gospel, beginning with the call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John from their fishing careers and ending with the final invitation to the disciples and Peter at the empty tomb. The term "disciples" is used over forty times in Mark's gospel, and "the Twelve" another ten times. For Mark, the disciples represent the church to which he addresses his gospel, the Christian community in Rome, and later believers in each generation. The Twelve represent church leaders, in Mark's community and in every age.

Discipleship that developed during the ministry of Jesus, discipleship in the early church of Rome, and discipleship throughout the centuries are joined together through the resurrection of Jesus. For the gospel of Mark, the resurrection is not so much the end of the gospel but, rather, the beginning. The life of Jesus is good news because he is risen. It is the reason that discipleship can be lived over and over again in the lives of each generation of Christians.

And so we join with disciples in every age to follow Jesus. As we enter the narrative of Mark's gospel, we learn from Jesus and his original disciples how to be a follower of the Risen Jesus today. Through the process of listening, reflecting, and praying, these texts of the gospel become our own and we find our place within the community of disciples.

Reflection and discussion

• What is the relationship between the two basic questions of Mark's gospel?

• How does Mark's gospel link the original disciples of Jesus with disciples in the church today?

Learning though the Successes and Failures of the Original Disciples

The gospel of Mark teaches about true discipleship by using two approaches: the via positiva and the via negativa. The disciples of Jesus are portrayed positively, so that readers can identify with them and become like them. Even more significantly, the disciples are portrayed negatively, enabling readers to see their misunderstandings and mistakes, even their denial and betrayal, to learn from their failures.

We see the disciples in a positive light at their call. Peter, Andrew, James, and John respond generously, leaving all to follow Jesus. They put their fate and their future into the hands of the master. They commit themselves to an unknown and uncertain future and to a totally new way of life. We see the Twelve as the intimate companions of Jesus as he teaches them about the mystery of the kingdom of God and as he explains to them his parables and sayings. Then, after being with Jesus, they are sent out by him on mission—to preach, drive out demons, and heal. The disciples continue following Jesus along his way, accompanying him on his fateful journey to Jerusalem.

We also see the disciples in a negative light through their failures. Throughout the first half of the Gospel, the disciples are continually unable to understand Jesus and what he has done. Over and over Jesus asks them: "Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear?" When Jesus heals the deaf man and then heals the blind man, surely Jesus is also seeking to heal the deafness and the blindness of all his followers.

In the second half of the gospel, as Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must suffer, die, and rise, he also teaches them about discipleship. Each time Jesus predicts his own passion, it is met by misunderstanding and resistance on the part of his disciples. Jesus responds each time by teaching them the intimate connection between who he is and what it means to be his disciple. This pattern is repeated three times as Jesus travels with his disciples from Galilee toward Jerusalem.

Following the first passion prediction of Jesus (8:31), Peter rebukes Jesus because he cannot accept the idea of a suffering Messiah (8:32-33). Jesus then teaches that whoever chooses to be disciples must deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow (8:34-35). Following Jesus' second prediction of the passion, the disciples argue over who is the greatest (9:32-34). Jesus then teaches them that a disciple is to be the last of all and the servant of all (9:35–37). Following Jesus' third and final prediction of the passion, James and John request places of honor when Jesus enters his glory (10:35–37). In teaching his disciples, Jesus rejects the way that power was exercised in the Roman world of his day. He dramatically reverses the standards of the world and shows that Isaiah's Suffering Servant—the one who gives his life for others—is the model both for his life and that of his disciples.

This section of the gospel is framed by two accounts of people restored to sight by Jesus: the blind man at Bethsaida, who gradually comes to see clearly, and the blind Bartimaeus, who, after receiving his sight, follows Jesus along the way. Jesus, in this section, is trying to heal the spiritual blindness of his disciples. By his teaching, he tries to open their eyes to new dimensions of discipleship. Jesus wants them to see that he is to suffer and die, and to see the significance of this for their discipleship. Like the gradual healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, the disciples gradually come to understand Jesus and their own discipleship. This step-by-step teaching of Jesus on discipleship occurs as Jesus and his followers travel toward the cross in Jerusalem.

The misunderstanding of the disciples in each of these three cycles of teaching points out three dangerous tendencies in Christian discipleship for every age: denial of suffering, desire for personal prestige, and competitiveness. The education Jesus gives them on the nature of true discipleship includes instructions intended for every age of the church. They are a summary of Jesus' primary teachings on the nature of discipleship and the qualities necessary for one who claims to be his follower.

Reflection and discussion

• What have I learned in the first half of Mark's gospel from the example of the disciples?

• Why would Mark so insistently emphasize the failures of Jesus' disciples?

Following Jesus to the Cross

In the passion account, the failures of the disciples are seen most dramatically. The confident Peter denies Jesus three times. His closest followers fall asleep in the garden. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. All his disciples leave him and flee at his darkest hour. No disciple stands at the foot of the cross in Mark's gospel. Every one of them has good intentions and a real desire to follow Jesus to the end. Yet, they do not understand Jesus' continual teaching about the necessity of the cross.

Ironically, it is the minor characters of the gospel who respond best to the demands of discipleship. The blind man Bartimaeus follows Jesus to Jerusalem. The woman at Bethany anoints Jesus despite the protests of his disciples. The Gentile centurion at the cross proclaims the faith that the disciples of Jesus should have understood. The women who followed Jesus from Galilee continue to minister to him in life and in death. A member of the Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea, is the only one courageous enough to approach Pilate and give Jesus a proper burial.

Readers of Mark's gospel in every age readily identify with the disciples. They reflect the enthusiasms, misunderstandings, and failures characteristic of the church in Mark's community and of the church in every succeeding generation. As the grumbling of Israel in the desert was written down for the instruction of each succeeding generation, so the misunderstandings and failures of the disciples of Jesus are written down for our instruction. When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, he is calling us. When Jesus rebukes his disciples for their failure to understand, we stand convicted. When the disciples betray, deny, and abandon Jesus, we know that we have done the same. Yet, we are also confronted with the forgiveness of Jesus and offered the hope of another chance to follow him.

The fact that Mark's gospel is open-ended offers readers in every age the opportunity to identify with those first disciples. The good news of Mark is that, despite our failures, Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins and constantly renews the call to follow him. Through the disciples of Jesus in the gospel, Mark illustrates the true meaning of discipleship for all times. Mark demonstrates for his own community and for ours that the disciple is not one who sits back and reaps the benefits of being a Christian. The cross of Jesus, the Suffering Servant, presents a challenge for all who choose to be followers of the Risen Lord.

Reflection and discussion

• How could the disciples continually fail to understand Jesus, even all the way to the cross?

• What do I hope to learn about following Jesus during the second half of Mark's gospel?

The End is the New Beginning

The other three gospel accounts in the New Testament begin much more elaborately and end much more gloriously than the account of Mark. The gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with detailed infancy narratives of Jesus, and John's gospel begins with his dramatic prologue on the Word of God. Each of these three gospels ends with remarkable appearances of the risen

Jesus. Mark's gospel has none of this. The gospel begins with a one-verse intro announcing "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It concludes abruptly with the empty tomb of Jesus, a promise that Jesus will see his disciples in Galilee, and the fear and flight of the women (16:6-8). As we will see, the other endings of Mark are clearly added later by another author in imitation of the other gospels. There are no resurrection appearances in Mark's gospel. Rather, it concludes with hopeful uncertainty.

Yet, despite the failure of the disciples and the fearful flight of the women, the promise given at the end of the gospel surely was fulfilled. The risen Jesus did indeed encounter his disciples in Galilee, and the church arose from that meeting. For that reason, the gospel of Mark proclaims a confident hope for failed, frightened, and fleeing disciples in every generation.

The gospel was written in and for the church, the ongoing community of disciples. The Roman setting in which Mark wrote his gospel has many parallels to the situation of believers in the church today. Rome was a culture desperately in need of the gospel, but which fought it mightily. In many parts of the world today, professing Christian faith puts one at risk of persecution, discrimination, and suffering. Even in places with a history of Christian culture, commitment to Jesus Christ can bring alienation from family, colleagues, and associations. Seeking to evangelize the culture today often leads to condescension, exclusion, and hostility. In this context, Mark's gospel offers insights, challenges, and encouragement for the church of our time.

Because Jesus is risen, all that he said and did during his earthly life are not merely events of history but present and future sources of evangelical power. A reflective and prayerful reading of the gospel brings us into living contact with Jesus through the working of the Holy Spirit. When we experience flaws and failure in discipleship, Jesus promises to manifest himself with his forgiveness and grace.

Reflection and discussion

• In what ways does a reflective and prayerful reading of the gospel offer me hope?

• How does the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit influence the way that I read the gospel?

Prayer

Father of Jesus, your only Son healed the deaf and the blind, but his disciples failed to hear his teachings and closed their eyes to his saving deeds. As I continue to study this gospel of Mark, guide me to faith and hope in Jesus. As I follow Jesus from Galilee to the cross, form me as an obedient disciple, trusting in your grace. Let your Spirit come upon me to guide my reflection and prayer so that I may remain faithful to the challenge of living the good news according to Mark.