

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION¹

(Reading Mark 8:22-10:52)

INTRODUCTION

I have the privilege of inhabiting the church here in Australia and in Asia, particularly in the Philippines. It's a privilege to experience something of the Christianity of the Majority World – that of Asia, Africa and South America – which now constitutes 70% of Global Christianity.² But it is also a difficult experience. One feels torn. And it is not easy to be part of the church in Australia when it struggles with its identity and relevance. Quite a number of my friends have given up on the church here. They are part of a growing exodus.

I am not going to fall into the all too easy trap of comparing the one situation with the other, but I do believe that one of the central challenges facing the church in the West is the matter of formation. A very easy believism can make us part of the life of the church, and with little faith and life-style formation, it is easy for us to succumb to the dominant narratives of our culture, instead by being shaped by the narratives of the gospel.³

In picking up the theme of formation, which obviously needs to occur in the framework of relationship and community, I wish to turn to the theme of Christian discipleship and look at its discussion in Mark's gospel. Ernest Best points out that a "true understanding of discipleship depends on a true understanding of Jesus" and that "discipleship becomes apparent only in the light of the cross." He goes on to suggest that discipleship also involves dealing with oneself in terms of consecration, obedience and self-discipline and involves relating to fellow disciples and yet to be followers of Jesus.⁴

MARK'S OVERALL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Many scholars have interpreted Mark's gospel and there is a diversity of opinion about many features of this gospel. But many are agreed on the following themes:⁵

- The gospel moves from Jesus being on the periphery in Galilee and moves resolutely to the centre of things in Jerusalem. This raises the challenging question whether in working for change we need to move from the margins to the centre.
- Much of the action in this gospel takes place while Jesus and his disciples are "on the way" (*ho hodos*). This suggests that the Christian life is not about one or two key phases, but that the whole of one's life in Christ is a journey. It's a pilgrimage, with lots of contours on the road.
- This gospel makes the point that the confession of Jesus as the Christ involves following him and issues in a life of discipleship and formation and service. Thus we don't embrace Jesus as Saviour and at some later point or periodically decide to follow him. We are to be disciples and followers right at the very beginning.
- This gospel's main theme is that the way of redemption and healing involves suffering. Christ is the suffering servant. We are called to follow this Christ.

¹ The title is from a book. E. H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.

² See P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ See J. K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

⁴ E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp.12-14.

⁵ See M. E. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

FORMATION THROUGH DISCIPLESHIP⁶

In the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel the disciples are doing pretty well in following Jesus. Most of us also know something of the first blush of coming to faith. All seems to be well. When that fades, as it inevitably will, we are faced with all sorts of challenges and painful transformations. This theme is developed by Mark in chapters 8:22 to 10:52. And Mark uses two healings as bookends to frame this theme. So let's enter into Mark's narrative where he seeks to teach his readers, and us, by the power not of positive example (to which we could easily respond: we are not good enough, or that is beyond us), but by way of failure (to which we may respond: yes, that is me).

THE BLIND MAN AT BETHSAIDA (8:22-26): A SECOND TOUCH

The earlier painful comments from Jesus set the scene: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?"..."Do you not yet understand?" (Mk. 8:18-21). And then follows this story of the blind man. The point is clear enough. The disciples in their understanding and in their following of Christ, have grasped something. But they are still partly blind. Like the man at Bethsaida, they see, but not clearly. There is much that they don't understand. They need further healing, further insight and transformation.

This has implications for us. The Christian life is not based on a singular experience. And even though we have come to faith, there is much to learn. We have little idea of the strange way that God works with us. And initially our faith is oriented to simply gaining benefits for ourselves. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, however, makes it clear that we have to grow from loving God for our own sake to loving God for his sake.⁷

PETER'S CONFESSION AND HIS MISUNDERSTANDING (8:27-33): DON'T PUT JESUS IN A BOX

The partial blindness of the disciples is evident in this part of Mark's narrative. Peter rightly confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. But he understands little of the fact that Jesus is the Suffering Servant.⁸ And Mark so seeks to emphasize this fact that he talks about Christ's suffering two more times in this narrative (9:30-32; 10:32-34).⁹ That Peter and the others had some sort of Triumphant Messiah in view is evident in that twice the disciples argue about prominence and greatness (9:34, 10:35-45). The painful lesson that they have to learn is that a Suffering Christ means suffering in the way of discipleship. Here Karl Barth is most challenging with his idea that the way of Jesus is not simply on our behalf but that the way of Jesus will have to be repeated in us.¹⁰

Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus involves some violence towards Jesus. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him (8:32). This is the same term used for rebuking evil spirits. But it is Peter and not Jesus who has the wrong spirit. Peter is instructed to get behind Jesus (8:33). This is the right posture of a disciple to get behind and follow Jesus.

With Peter we too run the risk of having our own ideas about Jesus and his way with us. We too can easily put Jesus in a box: the prosperity Jesus, the kind and gentle Jesus, the anarchistic Jesus. The list is endless.

⁶ See E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981.

⁷ See E. Griffin, ed., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Harper Collins Spiritual Classics. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

⁸ See Isaiah's vision of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53.

⁹ Some commentators have suggested that Jesus' three-time emphasis on suffering was meant to countermand Peter's three times denial.

¹⁰ See Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

The greatest risk that we face today is that we create a Jesus who is a convenient add-on to our life-style rather than a Jesus who transforms us to become part of his Kingdom and his purposes for our world.¹¹

JESUS EMPHASIZES THE HEART OF DISCIPLESHIP (8:34-9:1): THE ART OF RELINQUISHMENT

Jesus makes it clear that the Christian life is cruciform. It is marked by the cross. This does not mean that one suffers whatever hardships life may throw at us. Rather, to take up the cross is yielding to God's purpose for our lives in the same way that Jesus was willing to drink the cup of suffering. It is living "not my will, but your will be done in my life."

This most deeply cuts us to the bone. The primordial sin was not disobedience but that we wanted to be as god. And our culture has placed us at the centre of things. Self-reliant, self-focussed, and self-determining are so much the themes of contemporary life. Jesus calls us to another way. Not self-concern but concerned about the things of God: the love of God and love of neighbour as our highest good.

Francis Fukuyama has rightly pointed out that what we moderns long for are not great possessions (despite the fact that our consumer culture shouts this at us) but significance.¹² And Mark suggests here that our true significance will be found in a life of Christ conformity and letting go of our old way of life crafted by our culture. This is a life-long process and is akin to Paul's notion of putting off the old self and putting on the new self formed by Christ (Colossians 3:9-11).

In living this way, we are invited into the mystery of a paschal spirituality where: giving is receiving, down is up, weakness is strength, and death issues in life. This is living with open hands¹³ rather than the clenched fist.

THE MOUNTAIN TOP (9:2-13): DON'T PITCH YOUR TENT AT A GREAT EXPERIENCE

Jesus has spoken of his forthcoming suffering (8:31) and has set his face towards Jerusalem (11:1). This mountain top experience may be thought as being a comfort to Jesus. But its purpose was for the disciples. They were to understand that the way of Jesus was prefigured in Moses and Elijah and that suffering was not incompatible with glorification. The voice from heaven makes this clear. While at Jesus' baptism Jesus is assured that he is the beloved Son (1:11), here the disciples are told to listen to Jesus (9:7). Thus discipleship is about listening and following, even when that involves embracing mystery.

Discipleship involves not only acts of the will in a life of obedience but also moments of revelation and mysticism.¹⁴ We are moved not simply by rational decisions but also by inspiration. One inspirational moment can shape a whole life-time. We need to think only of Mother Teresa's "second call" to serve the poorest of the poor in India.¹⁵

¹¹ M. E. Boring in *Mark: A Commentary* points out that Mark uses the following designations of Jesus: Christos, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Suffering Servant, Teacher, Prophet, Shepherd, the Holy One of God, Bridegroom, King of the Jews, Son of David, and the Coming One (pp. 249-257).

¹² F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books, 1993.

¹³ H. J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1972

¹⁴ See B. McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*. New York: The Modern Library, 2006. And C. Ringma, "Hear the Ancient Wisdom: Medieval Christian Mystics Speak to Present-Day Asian Evangelicals," in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in an Asian Context*. Eds. C. R. Ringma & K. Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong City: OMF Lit., 2014), pp.112-126.

¹⁵ See C. Ringma, *Wash the Feet of the World with Mother Teresa*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2008.

Peter's "blindness" in this situation was his desire to remain in this experience. Origen comments that Peter is trying "to preserve the glory of this 'mountaintop experience' and forestall the return to the plain and the journey to Jerusalem that will follow."¹⁶ The challenge for us is not to call a halt in the faith journey, nor to rest on the glories of the past. No single experience is the mosaic of discipleship. And to live on the laurels of our spiritual past can only lead to stagnation.

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP INTO THE VALLEY (9:14-29): IF YOU HAVE DONE IT BEFORE DON'T THINK YOU CAN DO IT AGAIN

While one may want to stay on the mountain top of a special experience, one has to live one's faith in normal life confronted by needs and challenges. The healing ministry is one such challenge. Mark's gospel makes it clear that the disciples had already engaged in both the ministry of exorcism and healing (6:12-13).¹⁷ But in this situation they failed. And what was at play was not learning some special technique, but the failure of prayer (9:29).

The challenge in discipleship is that we are to be a healing and prayerful presence to others, but that we don't rely on ourselves but continue to look to God for his gracious intervention. We are invited to be this in all the circumstances of life whether we are in the medical or human services fields or not. But we must not allow our experience or expertise to undermine a life of prayer.

DISCIPLESHIP INVOLVES SERVICE TO THE LEAST (9:33-37), GENEROSITY TOWARDS OTHERS (9:38-41) AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF ASCETICISM (9:42-50): A POSTURE OF VULNERABILITY

Throughout this narrative on discipleship Mark is teaching his readers that the disciples don't quite get it. They constantly miscue. And through their failure we can see what we are called to be and do.¹⁸ They are concerned about status (as we also so frequently are); instead they (and we) are called to serve the least. Not only is Mark telling us that we can't truly be disciples if we have no heart for the poor and needy, but he is also subverting all forms of hierarchy. The presence of Christ is not simply to be found in the power of the church and its clergy but also in service to the vulnerable ones. Here St. Francis and his kiss of the leper is a powerful example.¹⁹

Discipleship is also to live beyond tribalism with its mantra "we alone are right." There are others who are on a similar journey. Thus we are called from exclusion to embrace.²⁰ Discipleship involves practical ecumenism and cooperation.

And finally, discipleship involves voluntary relinquishment and sacrifice for the sake of the other. I want to harm no one. I am willing to sacrifice so that no harm comes to another.

¹⁶ Quoted in W. C. Placher, *Mark: A Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.129.

¹⁷ "So they [the disciples] went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:12-13).

¹⁸ In seeing the failure of others, the response is not: "I am better. I would never do that." Instead, it should be "how can respond in a more positive way."

¹⁹ See I. Delio, *Franciscan Prayer*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004.

²⁰ See M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE CONTOURS OF DAILY LIFE (10:1-45): LIVING THE ORDINARY EXTRA-ORDINARILY WELL²¹

A life of discipleship is not simply about the spectacular, it is also about the ordinary. Mark therefore highlights the importance of faithfulness in marriage and by way of extension to friendship and other relationships (10: 2-12). He calls us to faithfulness in serving the vulnerable (10: 13-16), and calls us to be Kingdom of God centered rather than under the sway of much-having (10: 17-31).

The story of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18) and what follows highlight that following Jesus should be the greatest force in one's life and that like the disciples we too need to sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom. At the same time, we are called not to a heroic aloneness in following Christ but to form communities of support and solidarity. Mark makes it clear that in this life we will "houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecution" (10: 30). Mark then highlights a different way of understanding of leadership and makes his central point that discipleship is following and being like the Suffering Servant who gives "his life as a ransom for many" (10: 45).

CONCLUSION

I began with the statement that my concern is the lack for formation in the present-day Western church. Formation has to do with becoming like Christ through his grace, the blessing of the Spirit, communal support, spiritual practices, and faithfulness and service in the ordinary dimensions of life. Formation occurs in movement of a life of discipleship – where we are "on the way" as learners to grow in Christ conformity. The great secret of the Christian life is that Christ takes gestalt or shape²² in us. Paul understood this well. He writes: "I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).

Some years ago, a Burmese Christian leader made this observation: "I have met some fine Evangelical theologians, pastors, community workers and business persons. I have never yet met an Evangelical saint."

Maybe if are purged by the things that Mark holds before us in these narratives, people may see more of the Christ in us.²³

Charles Ringma
PO Box 1546, Stafford City,
Brisbane, Q'land. 4053.

²¹ This is a key theme in Benedictine Spirituality. See J. Chittister, *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life*. London: SPCK, 2011.

²² Scholars have pointed out that Luther's central notion of justification by faith needs to be complemented by the more basic Pauline theme of the in-Christ relationship. Thus we are called to live a Christo-mysticism.

²³ See M. J. Christenson & J. A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.