

MISSION

SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

Marcan Mission Perspectives for Today's Church

I came to London in 1964 to complete *my* BD in Old Testament and left eighteen months later to spend the rest of my life studying and teaching New Testament - such was the impact of George Beasley-Murray. It was not just his voluminous knowledge of the subject, it was his enthusiasm, encouragement, and determination to relate the text to the twentieth century. This essay is offered as a symbol of my appreciation for his inspiration and encouragement over many years.

I

Space will not allow even a cursory analysis of all of the Marcan mission themes and I will restrict myself primarily to a consideration of Mark 6.6 - 8.21, the section of the Gospel where Mark addresses himself specifically to the question of mission. But first let us place the text within the wider context of Mark's narrative structure.

Theological Structure. Mark divides the first major section of his Gospel (1.14 - 8.26) into three smaller sections (1.14 - 3.6; 3.7 - 6.6a; 6.6b - 8.21), each commencing with a summary statement outlining an aspect of the ministry of Jesus (1.14-15 preaching; 3.7-12 healing; 6.6b teaching) followed by a discipleship story (1.16-20 call of the first disciples; 3.13-35 community of the disciples; 6.7-31 mission of the disciples) and concludes with a group of people opposed to Jesus (3.1-6 religious and political leaders plot to kill him; 6.1-6a his own townspeople reject him; 8.14-21 his disciples harden their hearts). On each occasion the material is divided into two smaller sections (1.21-45 and 2.1 - 3.6; 4.34 and 4.35 - 6.6a; 6.32 - 7.23 and 7.24 - 8.21) with geographical settings marking out the divisions and development, and Marcan 'sandwiches' (one story placed between the two parts of another) indicating themes (1.23-26 between 1.21-22 and 1.27-28 the authority of Jesus; 3.23-30 between 3.31-35 the new family of Jesus; 6.14-29 between 6.7-13 and 30-31 the cost of involvement in the mission of Jesus). An introductory transitional summary (1.14-15) links this section of the Gospel to the preface featuring John the Baptist (1.1-13) and a concluding transitional story (8.22-26) leads on to the following section on the meaning of discipleship (8.27 - 10.52).

Theological Chronology. Mark has prepared us for his theology of mission in the opening summary 'after John had been arrested (literally: "handed over") Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God' (1.14). According to Mark, John the Baptist (1.7), Jesus (1.14-15) and the early church (13.10) preach the gospel, and John (1.14-15), Jesus (14.21 and many places) and the early church (13.9) are 'handed over' to the authorities. The early church is to share in the preaching of the Gospel and in its fate.

Theological Geography. Mark describes six boat trips and two lengthy overland journeys. (1) Following the parable discourse delivered from a boat (4.1-34) Jesus commands the disciples to take him to the other side of the sea, which they do (4.35 - 5.1). This is a journey from the western side of the sea (which in Mark's narrative

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world is Jewish as signified by the synagogues in 1.21-18; 3.1-6; 5.21-24; 6.1-6) to the eastern side (which in Mark's narrative world is Gentile as signified by the pigs in 5.11-20). It is a stormy crossing and for a time it looks as though they may not make it; with help from Jesus, they are finally successful. (2) After healing the Gerasene demoniac they return to the Jewish side without difficulty (5.18,21). (3) In order to escape the crowds they take a short boat trip along the western side of the sea - only to find that the crowd has arrived before them (6.30-34). (4) Jesus feeds the 5,000 on the Jewish side of the lake (6.35-44) and compels his disciples to embark and cross to Bethsaida, on the Gentile side. They make heavy weather of it again and, although Jesus rescues them (6.45-52), they land at Gennesaret, still on the Jewish side. (5) Following an altercation with a group of Pharisees, and some scribes who have come down from Jerusalem (7.1-23), Jesus journeys to the territory of Tyre (where he is encountered by the Syrophenecian woman) (7.24-30), (6) returning by a very circuitous route through Gentile territory ending up on the Gentile side of the sea (7.31), where he heals a deaf man who could not speak (7.32-37) and feeds the 4,000 (8.1-10). (7) They embark and travel to Dalmanutha (probably Magdala on the Jewish side). (8) Following another altercation with the Pharisees, Jesus embarks and makes for the other shore. On the way he exchanges strong words with the disciples about the meaning of the feeding miracles (8.14-21), but this time they finally make it to Bethsaida on the Gentile side (8.22). These are not simply descriptions of Jesus wandering aimlessly around Galilee - they are theological narratives presenting his mission, and the mission of the church, among Jews and Gentiles. Unlike the disciples who have hardened their hearts and have not understood about the loaves (6.25), the reader will have picked up Mark's cue; the journey in the direction of the Gentiles is fraught with difficulties and dangers, but must be undertaken nonetheless (4.35 - 5.1; 6.45-52; 8.14-21).

Theological Space and Culture. In the opening miracle story (1.21-28) Jesus is confronted by a man with an 'unclean spirit' who screams, 'What have we got in common, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!' (1.24). In the light of the declaration that Jesus is 'the Holy One of God!', the answer to the first question is obviously 'nothing!', and to the second is clearly an emphatic 'yes!' Jesus is the Holy One of God but as the narrative unfolds Jesus breaks through all of the purity boundaries relating to persons, things, places and times: he touches a leper (1.41), allows a woman with a flow of blood to touch him (5.24-28), declares all food clean (7.19), heals on the sabbath (3.1-6), opposes the temple (11.15-18), and, most importantly from our point of view, moves in and out among the Gentiles exposing himself to pollution on all sides (5.1-20; 7.24 - 8.10). In the first section of the Gospel (1.14 - 3.6) Mark shows Jesus' authority as the 'Holy One of God' (1.21-39) who challenges the religious authorities to recognize his authority (1.40-45) only to be met with opposition and the first death plot, occasioned because he broke the sabbath (3.1-6). In the second section (3.6 - 6.6a) Mark is concerned about the membership of the Christian community (4.10-12, 'insiders' and 'outsiders') and Jesus travels across the sea to welcome a Gentile (5.1-20) before returning to heal two Jewish women; the healing of a poor unclean woman (5.24b-34) taking precedence over the respectable woman who had a leading male pleading her cause (5.21-24a,35-43). In the third section (6.6b - 8.21) Mark is concerned about the nature of the Christian mission and the travels of Jesus provide the clues with the watershed coming in the story about purity regulations (7.1-23) and the encounter with the Syrophenecian woman (7.24-30).

II

From the clues or codes which we have already identified, we will not be surprised

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to find that structure, geography, space and culture carry the theological understanding of the mission of the Church in Mark's story.

The narrative has been placed with the basic structure of opening summary statement (6.6b) and discipleship story (6.7-31) and concluding opposition (8.14-21). A Marcan sandwich indicates the theme of the section, with the story of the death of John the Baptist (6.14-29) placed between the two parts of the story of the mission of the disciples (6.7-13,30-31). The section (6.6 - 8.21) is divided up into two subsections (as also in 1.21-45 and 2.1-3.6; 4.1-34 and 4.35-6.6a) through the use of geography which places the first half in Jewish territory (6.6 - 7.23) the second half in gentile territory (7.24-8.9). The concluding episodes, which bring out the significance of the section, repeat the pattern with an encounter with the Pharisees on the Jewish side (8.10-12) and a discussion with the disciples on the way back to the Gentile side of the lake (8.14-22a).

The key theological term which carries the narrative is ἄρτος ('bread', or 'loaf', or 'food' generally): the disciples are told to take 'no bread' (6.8), 5,000 are fed with 'bread' and fish (6.37,38,41,41,44), the disciples do not understand about 'the bread' (6.52), religious leaders dispute with Jesus about eating 'bread' with unclean hands (7.2,5), the Syrophenecian woman is told it is not right to take children's 'bread' and give it to the dogs (7.27), the 4,000 are fed with 'bread' (8.4,5,6), the disciples forget to take 'bread', except for one 'loaf' they have in the boat (8.14,14) and Jesus draws out the meaning of the breaking of 'bread' for the 5,000 and the 4,000 (8.16,17,19).

1) When Jesus began his public ministry as the Holy One of God everyone was amazed that he taught with such 'authority' that even the unclean spirits obeyed him (1.21-28). This authority is now given to *the disciples as they are sent out on mission* (6.7-13) and the terminology 'unclean spirits' (3.15) is used rather than 'demons' because their mission is going to raise the question of 'clean and unclean' as Jesus presses beyond the boundaries (7.1-23).

When Jesus called his first disciples, he promised that they would catch people (1.17 redactional) and in his first mention of the community, Mark tells us that they were called to preach and to have authority to cast out demons (3.15). Now, having been given authority over the unclean spirits (6.7), Mark tells us that they went out and preached that the people might change their way of living. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them (6.12-13). The undertaking was both urgent and costly and the followers of Jesus were being called on to trust God and to identify with the poor of Galilee among whom they were to minister. They were to stay with the first people who offered them hospitality, resisting the temptation to move to better quarters should such be offered.

2) Mark has waited six chapters to tell of *the death of John the Baptist* (6.14-29; cf. 1.14) and he inserts the story in the interlude between the disciples being sent out on mission (6.7-13) and their return from that mission (6.30-31). It evokes images of the enmity of Jezebel towards Elijah and the weakness of Ahab (1 Kings 17-21) and continues the understanding of John's role as the suffering Elijah preparing the way of the Lord and of his people (Mark 1.2-8; 9.9-13; 15.35-36). Placed between the sending out of the disciples on mission and their return (6.7-13, 30-31), it warned of the cost of involvement in the mission of God. John, the messianic forerunner, lost his head because of his mission (6.14-29), Jesus was rejected by the religious and political elite and crucified because of his mission (15.21-39), Christian missionaries will be arrested, beaten, and dragged before the authorities for proclaiming the gospel to the nations (13.9-11).

3) In the description of *the return of those who had been sent out* (6.30-31), we meet the only Marcan usage of the early church's favourite title of authority, 'the apostles',

but it is clear that he is using it as a verbal noun, meaning 'when those who had been sent out returned'. In view of the widespread use of the title in the early church it seems Mark's usage is quite deliberate. The 'authority' given to the leaders is the authority needed to carry out their mission (6.7); they are 'apostles' only as long as they engage in apostolic mission.

4) Jesus' attempt to find solitude is unsuccessful and leads to an extension of his ministry through *the first great feeding of the people of God in the wilderness* (6.33-52). The story incorporates many Old Testament images, especially God's supply of food to Israel during their time in 'the wilderness' (Exod 16.1; Num 11.1-35). Mark has enhanced this perspective by placing the story on the Jewish side of the lake, stressing that they picked up 'twelve' baskets full of broken pieces (6.43; and especially 8.19 redactional) and relating it to the feeding of the children in the discussion with the Syrophenecian woman (7.27 redactional). Only in the two feeding miracles (6.32-44; 8.1-9) does Jesus involve his disciples in the performance of a miracle story and it fully accords with Mark's desire to get his church involved in the mission of Jesus. The eucharistic language probably belonged to the earliest strata of church tradition before being incorporated into Mark (6.41; 8.6; cf. 14.22; 1 Cor. 11.24), but it has taken on an additional dimension through the discussion about the 'one loaf' (8.14). While the statement that there was bread left over originally served as a demonstration that a miracle had taken place, in the Marcan sequence it means the disciples should have realised that there would be plenty for everyone - Jews and Gentiles alike.

5) The account of *the unsuccessful attempt of the disciples to cross over the Gentile side of the sea* (6.45-52) has caused endless difficulties for interpreters. Jesus 'compels' the disciples to embark and cross over to Bethsaida - located on the Gentile side according to Mark's theological map. The disciples were obviously less than enthusiastic about venturing over there on their own. It was not the sea that worried them so much - four of them were fishermen and Jesus tended to go to sleep in the boat - it was the Gentiles! The journey beyond the boundary is always difficult and the explanatory statement 'for the wind was against them' (7.48b redactional) is not a simple meteorological observation. Like other such statements in Mark it is loaded with theological significance and this is clear when we observe that they have a full sail on the way home (5.21; 8.10). When things were at their worst, Jesus came to their rescue, walking on the water in scenes reminiscent of the theophanies to Elijah and Moses (Exod 33.18-23; 34.5-9; 1 Kings 19.9-18). They came safely to shore, but not to the other side as intended; for it is only much later that they arrive at their proposed destination of Bethsaida (8.22). The conclusion, stating that they were astounded 'for they had not understood about the loaves, but their hearts had been hardened' (6.52 redactional), emphasizes that a correct understanding of the feeding miracles (6.32-44; 8.1-9) is the key to this section of the Gospel.

6) There has been a strong debate as to whether *the healings at Gennesaret* (6:53-56) are portrayed as healings on the Jewish or the Gentile side of the sea. However, as Gennesaret is on the eastern shore and as the transfer to the Gentile focus happens only after Jesus has declared all foods clean (7.1-23), it seems they serve as the concluding summary of the mission to the Jews.

7) In the account of *Jesus' abrogation of the traditional boundaries of Jewish religion* (7.1-23), the evidence and intention of Mark's handiwork is clear. The Pharisees have already joined with the Herodians in a plot to do away with Jesus (3.6 redactional), and scribes 'who have come down from Jerusalem' have previously accused Jesus of collusion with Beelzebul (3.22 redactional). In Mark 'Jerusalem' is

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the place of opposition, rejection and death. The deadly intention of the scribes who 'come down from Jerusalem' (3.22; 7.1) is evident from the later notice that Jesus 'goes up to Jerusalem' to be arrested, condemned to death and killed (10.31-33 redactional). Mark's lengthy explanatory comment (7.3-4) is as important theologically as it is difficult historically. This story is not about the rejection of the strict code of a minority of legalistic extremists; it is the setting aside of boundaries which make the Jewish faith Jewish. The saying 'nothing that goes into a person can defile that person' (7.15) lifts the whole of the Old Testament law off its hinges. Mark provides it with a new setting (7.14a) and a new introductory exhortation (7.15b), adding the disciples' request for an explanation of 'the parable' which allows Mark to draw out the significance of the saying for his 'house-churches' by incorporating the comment 'declaring all food clean' (7.19c) and adding a traditional Hellenistic(-Jewish) understanding of purity regulations which prepares for the inclusion of the Gentiles (7.20-23).

8) *The healing of the daughter of a Syrophenician woman* (7.24-30) functions as the turning point in the missionary narrative. Within Mark's theological framework, Tyre is as far from Jerusalem - the centre of the Jewish faith - as it is possible to go. In a story that reflects the ethnic, cultural and socio-political hostility between Jews and Gentiles, a gentile woman, through the logic of her argument, leads Jesus to redefine the boundaries specifically to include the Gentiles. She is described as 'a woman', 'a Greek' and as 'a Syrophenician' and she breaks all cultural taboos when in an outburst of shameful behaviour she bursts through the barriers and enters the house where Jesus has been seeking solitude. Jesus' reply is sharp and direct as he defends the honour and priority of the Jews in the history of salvation (7.27). The woman, however, is not so easily silenced and she breaks through again, this time on behalf of the Gentiles (7.28). Jesus allows himself to be 'shamed' and admits the validity of her insights, confirming them in word and action (7.29).

In interpreting the key word 'first' (7.27), most commentators ignore the location of the story in Mark's theological framework. It indicates not only the 'priority' of the Jews in salvation history, but a priority which, according to Mark, belongs in the past. They have already been fed (6.32-44). Now is the time for the Gentiles to be fed, says Mark. Their time has come (8.1-9).

9) The 'impossible' circuitous route of *Jesus' return trip* 'from Tyre through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee up into the centre of the Decapolis districts' (7.24) is probably Mark's deliberate attempt to indicate that at this stage Jesus made an even deeper penetration into Gentile territory. The healing of the deaf person who could not speak (7.24-30) has a number of parallels with the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8.22-26), and together they reflect the fulfilment of the eschatological promises of Isaiah 35.5, but unique is the statement 'groaning he looked up into heaven and said to it (or to him), "Ephphatha" which means "Be opened"' (7.34). The only other reference to Jesus looking up into heaven occurs in the feeding of the 5,000 (6.42) and the ambiguous 'said to it (or 'him') most naturally refers back to 'heaven', in which case Jesus is calling for heaven to 'be opened' for the Gentiles. In the first part of the concluding choral response 'he has done all things well' (8.37b), the plural and the perfect indicate that it has a more programmatic dimension as an affirmation of the entire mission of Jesus (to the Jews and to the Gentiles).

10) The story of the feeding of the four thousand (8.1-9) evokes a number of Marcan theological images: the people have come 'from afar', they have been with Jesus 'three days', he does not wish to send them 'to their houses' lest they faint 'on the way' (8.2-3). These images take on additional significance within the context of Mark's presentation of the story as *the second great feeding of the people of God*, the feeding

of the Gentiles.

Jesus has compassion on the crowd again (8.2), but this time, in Mark's structure, it is because they are Gentiles ('from afar'), not because they are Jews with poor leaders (6.43-44). Despite the previous miracle, the disciples again display their lack of understanding (8.4) and distance themselves both from the people and from Jesus. Not willing to be turned aside from his mission, and desirous of drawing his church into it, Jesus again incorporates the disciples in his actions. The allusion to the Lord's Supper tradition (1 Cor. 11.24) prepares for Jesus' explanation concerning the 'one loaf' (8.14-21).

11) When they return to Jewish side of the lake (8.10), *the Pharisees tempt Jesus*, seeking a sign from heaven. But heaven has already been opened (7.34-35) and the Gentiles have been fed (8.1-9). 'This people' (or 'generation', but here 'this people' is more appropriate and, for Mark, on this side of the sea = 'the Jews') will not be given a sign (8.11-12).

12) When Jesus healed on the sabbath the Pharisees held counsel with the Herodians in the first death plot against Jesus (3.6) and the two groups came together again in a further attempt to trap him (12.13-17) immediately after the third death plot (12.12 redactional). The combination has been changed to *the Pharisees and Herod* here, since in the storyline of this section of the Gospel Herod has killed John (6.14-29) and the Pharisees have challenged Jesus (7.1,3,5). Let the disciples beware.

The 'one loaf' in the boat (8.14) is evocative of the Eucharist in the church and for Mark's missionary emphasis it is important that there is only one loaf, not two. The altercation between Jesus and his disciples (8.17-21 redactional) recalls the harsh language of Isaiah 6.9-19. They are on the verge of irretrievable apostasy and it will take a miracle to open their eyes (8.22-26). Jesus takes his disciples back through the miracles of feeding, i.e. Mark takes his church back through the clues that he has built into his missionary narrative. They answer correctly: 'Twelve!' 'Seven!' But do they understand? 'Israel!' 'The whole world!'

III

In the space that remains I should like to draw some of the implications of Mark's missionary theology for today's church, particularly as they relate to the working class, the unemployed and the urban poor - those who live on the other side of the sea from our predominantly middle-class churches.

1) The first and most obvious implication from Mark's presentation is that *mission begins and ends with Jesus of Nazareth*. It is Jesus who takes the initiative, provides the inspiration and determines the direction of the church's mission in the world. The three summary statements delineating the various aspects of the ministry of Jesus (1.14-15 preaching; 3.7-12 healing; 6.6 teaching) precede and prepare for the sending out of the disciples on mission (6.7-13). In each of the discipleship stories, Jesus takes the initiative (1.16-20 he calls the disciples to follow him; 3.13-19 he calls the Twelve as the nucleus of the new people of God; 6.7-13 he sends them out on mission).

2) The second implication of Mark's presentation is that *mission is the crown of discipleship*. According to Mark, the call to discipleship (1.16-20) always leads to community (3.13-31) and to involvement in the community's mission in the world (6.7-13). Mission is not an optional extra in the life of discipleship. Without involvement in mission the call to discipleship is truncated and incomplete, the community lacks direction and purpose. It is intended that all of the church should be involved in the mission and that the authority of the leadership is directly related

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to their involvement in the church's mission.

3) The mission of the church is *not to be bound by social, cultural and economics boundaries*, no matter how important they may seem to the life of the church or of the society of which it is a part. Indeed, the characteristic of Jesus' ministry in Mark's presentation is that he continually ignored the religious and cultural taboos and repeatedly crossed the boundaries that determined relationships in Palestinian society. His missionary narrative focuses on the need for the church to cross these boundaries that all may experience the liberating power of the gospel.

4) The mission of the church is *concerned for all aspects of existence* - the personal, social, economic and political aspects of life are all included. According to Mark, the mission of the disciples is to persuade people to change the way they are living, teach them how to live in relationship with God and with one another, heal the lives of individuals, and overthrow the demonic systems that hold people captive. Certainly, Jesus sent them out to preach the gospel, but we also need to remember that when he sought to draw the disciples into his mission it was to help him feed the hungry.

5) The most striking feature in the section of Mark that we have reviewed is the way that Jesus accepts the cultural shame of being upstaged by a Gentile woman! This would have been totally unacceptable within the context of first century Palestinian life. In his first answer Jesus identified with the basic tenet of his culture, the priority of the Jews (7.27), without recognising the damage that a false understanding of that priority had caused in the lives of the people who lived on the margins of their society. However, when the Gentile woman reminds him of the situation of her people, he admits his mistake and affirms the truth that she has expressed (7.29). If the church wants to move out beyond the boundaries of its own cultural captivity, it *must be willing to experience the culture shock and, where necessary, to endure the cultural shame* that is part of this movement. Those of us who are from the privileged groups in society will have to be willing to admit to the damage which the system, from which we have benefitted, has so often caused to those who have been forced to live on the other side of the sea.

6) As the church moves out in holistic mission beyond the boundaries of its own middle-class culture, identifying with and becoming servants of the hungry and the marginalised, it will find itself in *conflict with some religious and political authorities* who have a vested interest in maintaining their position as beneficiaries of the existing boundary systems. The spirit which motivated the religious and political leaders in their opposition to John the Baptist, Jesus, and the early church will be as active in the twenty-first century as in the first.

7) *As the church moves out beyond the boundaries of our culture it is assured that it has all the resources necessary* for the mission to which God is calling it. The leaders of Mark's church are not the only ones to assert that they do not have the resources for a mission across the sea, overlooking the resources at hand (8.16). One loaf in the boat (8.14) might not seem a great deal in the face of the enormity of the task, but when we recall what the loaf embodied through the presence of Jesus the equation is altered. We are again being compelled to go to the other side of the sea, to cross the boundaries of our culture (6.45). The challenge is still to take no money in our belts, to identify with the poor and to trust in God (6.7-13).

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