Jesus' Second Call to Discipleship in Mark's Gospel (8:27-9:1)

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***Note**: People always say to us: "We want more Bible study…" So, below is a review of some basics that undergird our work at BCM. As we come out of the summer break, the Revised Common Lectionary Gospel text for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost (September 12, 2021) includes Jesus' call to the Way of the Cross. In these days of reckoning with crimes past (Indian Residential School grave uncoveries), present (voter suppression and extractive industry violations) and future (deepening climate catastrophe), we need Mark's summons to costly discipleship more than ever. The following is an edited excerpt from Chapter 11 of Say to This Mountain (Orbis, 1996). You can find this popular commentary on Mark (and a Spanish version) at www.bcm-net.org/resources/books.*

This text represents the midpoint of Mark's story. The first half began heralding a "Way" (1:2), and closed with a question addressed to the disciples and the reader: "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21). The second half opens "on the Way" (8:27), with yet another query: "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29a). Do we really know who Jesus is, and what he is about? It is a shock to discover here that Peter's "correct" answer (8:29b) is immediately silenced (8:30). This is followed by a "confessional crisis" (8:30-33) and Jesus' second call to discipleship (8:34ff). Together these represent the fulcrum upon which the whole gospel balances, the clearest revelation of Mark's thesis: Discipleship is not about theological orthodoxy or rhetorical confession, but about embracing the Way of the cross.

This fourth major section in Mark's narrative (8:22-10:52) is punctuated by three "portents" in which Jesus speaks of his impending arrest, trial and execution by the authorities (8:31, 9:31, 10:33f). After each Mark portrays the disciples' failure to comprehend, which in turn issue in three respective teaching cycles, each of which revolves around a rhetorical antithesis:

"Whosoever would save her life will lose it..." (8:35)
"If anyone would be first, he must be last..." (9:35)
"Whosoever would be great among you must be your servant..." (10:43)

Throughout this story, Jesus' use of "whosoever" functions as an "interactive" appeal to the audience, representing a kind of "blank space" we are challenged to fill in with *our* name.

Mark's triple cycle has the catechetical character of a "school of the road," as Jesus and his disciples journey from the far north of Palestine to the outskirts of Jerusalem:

Geography	Portent	Incomprehension	Teaching
1) Caesarea-Philippi	8:31	8:32f	8:34ff
2) Galilee to Judea	9:31	9:32-34	9:35ff
3) to Jerusalem	10:32-34	10:35-37	10:39ff

The "Way of the cross" is explained through object lessons, both positive and negative.

This catechism is framed by two stories in which the "blind" receive sight: in Bethsaida (8:22-26) and in Jericho (10:45-52). The latter reading comes up this year on Oct 24th, and we're looking forward to celebrating the Feast of our patron saint Bartimaeus with our friends at Dreaming Stone in North Carolina.

Since the gospel's first storm episode (4:41), the issue of Jesus' identity has been lingering in the background; now Mark addresses it directly. The public's perception of Jesus (8:28) parallels the three misinterpretations reported earlier concerning John the Baptist (6:14-16). But when Jesus' friends are asked for *their* opinion, Peter hails him as "Messiah" (8:29). Here we meet this politically-loaded term for the first time since the story's title (1:1). The Messiah was

understood by many Jews in first century Palestine to be a royal figure who would someday restore the political fortunes of Israel. Based upon Mark's title and the subsequent centrality of this confession in the church, we are likely to approve of Peter's identification. But to our chagrin, Peter is roundly *silenced* by his rabbi (8:30)—as if he were just another demon trying to "name" Jesus (see 1:25; 3:12)! Then, with the phrase "Jesus began to teach them that it was necessary that the Human One must suffer," Mark's narrative makes a decisive turn (8:31).

Jesus' portents are often used by conservatives as proof of his divine clairvoyance, and dismissed by liberals as later theological interpretation. Both miss Mark's point. By "necessity" Mark means that those who pursue Jubilary justice will *inevitably* clash with the Powers. He is also serving notice that Jesus will *not* enter Jerusalem as a triumphant military leader, but rather will be executed by the authorities. This subverts the "Messianic script," replacing it with a prophetic one. At key points in the second half of the gospel, Mark will appeal to this framework: it defined John's work, will determine Jesus's fate (see 9:12f), and that of faithful disciples (see 13:9-13). Moreover, this first portent replaces the term Messiah with "Human One," the *persona* who earlier challenged the Debt system and restored the Jubilary Sabbath (2:10,28). This moniker derives from the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7, which provides the key to understanding Jesus' second call to discipleship.

"And he spoke this word plainly" (8:32)—but Peter, like most of Christendom after him, refuses to accept this "Messianic revisionism." The exchange thus escalates into a series of sharp rebukes, ending in Jesus' harsh "counter-naming" of Peter (8:32f):

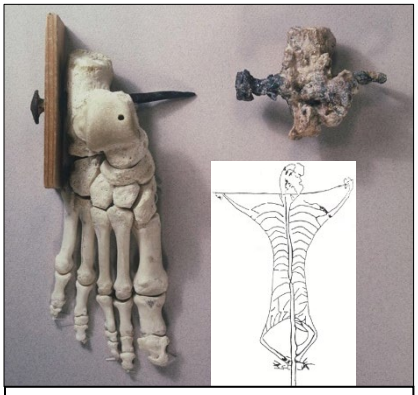
Peter: Jesus is Messiah
Jesus silences Peter
Jesus: Human One must suffer
Peter silences Jesus
Jesus again silences Peter
Jesus: Peter is aligned with Satan

What has poor Peter done to deserve such round denunciation? The problem is, he remains loyal to the traditional Messianic script that affirms the "myth of redemptive violence," in which hero prevails over enemy through superior and "righteous" force (see the work of Walter Wink, Gil Bailie and Robert Beck). This is the oldest lie, with which "Satan" (the archetypal adversary) rules history, as nations and peoples invoke God while destroying their enemies through "just" wars and "holy" crusades. But Jesus embraces the Human One's strategy of *nonviolence*, which understands the enemy to be violence itself.

Jesus' first call to discipleship invited people to "leave" their places in the prevailing social and economic order and to "follow" him in reclaiming the Jubilary vision and God's sovereignty (1:16-20). The second call now articulates the political consequences of that practice (8:34). Jesus' invitation begins where his argument with Peter left off: "Get behind me" (8:33) becomes "If anyone desires to follow behind me…" (8:34). Two conditions for discipleship are now stipulated: "Deny yourself and take up your cross." (*Right: traditional Greek Orthodox icon.*)

The cross was *not* a religious icon in first century Palestine. Nor was "taking up the cross" a metaphor for personal anguish. Crucifixion had only one connotation in Mark's time: the vicious form of capital punishment reserved by imperial Rome for political dissidents. This brutal form of public execution was a warning against insurrection, and a common sight during Jesus' lifetime. In contrast to Judean nationalists who were recruiting patriots to "take up the sword" against Rome, Mark's Jesus invited his disciples to "take up the cross." The rhetoric of "self-denial," in turn, should be understood in the context of a political trial

(not private asceticism). Under interrogation by State security forces, admitting allegiance to "YHWH's sovereignty" would bring charges of subversion in a world where Caesar alone claimed lordship. Self-denial is about costly political choices.



Top right: the calcaneus of Yehohanon ben Hagkol, with transfixed nail, with a reconstruction at left. Bottom right: 2nd century graffito of a Roman crucifixion from Puteoli, Italy).

Jesus next restates the matter another way. If one attempts to "save one's life" by denying the Jubilary project (thus "being ashamed of me and of my words," 8:38a), one will lose true life (8:35). Conversely, to live and die "for my sake and the gospel" is to truly experience "life." These two choices will be juxtaposed dramatically in Mark's Passion narrative. Peter will "save himself" in the Palace courtyard, only to break down after disowning Jesus (14:66-72). Right next door in the Palace courtroom Jesus will confess the Human One (14:55-65)—and consequently "take up his cross" (15:25).

Jesus then turns to an economic metaphor: Self-preservation at the cost of apostasy represents a bad investment, not a "profit" but a "forfeiture" (8:36f). We will later see Judas "sell out" for pocket money (14:11) at the cost of his soul (14:21). Jesus thus thrice reiterates that "gain" and "loss" should *not* be calculated according to the dominant culture's ledgers. Unfortunately, we Christians have mostly failed to experiment with the mysterious calculus of Jesus' nonviolence. The homily closes by invoking a different vision of justice (8:38). Traditional exegesis has interpreted the image of the Human One "Coming in glory" in terms of Christ's eschatological victory (violently achieved, it is assumed). The key to understanding this scenario, however, lies in the heavenly courtroom vision of Daniel 7.

The book of Daniel was a manifesto of Jewish resistance written two centuries before the time of Jesus and Mark, during persecutions by the Hellenistic tyrant Antiochus Epiphanies IV. The first half of Daniel offers stories of heroism (Dan 2-6), but the second half switches to a different kind of genre to make the same point: apocalyptic narrative. Apocalyptic was a popular, highly symbolistic type of literature that often employed heavenly visions and angelic interpreters in order to offer veiled commentary on current political events. Apocalyptic visions, commonly misconstrued by modern readers as predictions of the future, instead mean to open up another dimension to history—"God's point of view." Apocalyptic dualism bifurcates reality in order to criticize "this age" from the perspective of "the age to come." Yet these two realms actually co-exist—but we need "eyes to see" them both.

The prophet Daniel first "sees" oppressive rulers (the "beasts" of Dan 7:2-8) who persecute the Jews (7:19-25). But the eyes of faith reveal what is *really* happening ("As I looked..." 7:9). At the center of the vision is a courtroom scene in which the "Ancient of Days" judges the beasts (7:9-12, 26f) and hands over true authority to the "saints" (7:18). Judgment is rendered on behalf of a "Human One" who makes an entrance "on the clouds of heaven" (7:13). This is the image Mark employs in his gospel (see also Mk 14:62). Daniel's apocalyptic visions assured persecuted Jews who were defendants in Hellenistic courts that there was a "higher court of true justice," in which they were being vindicated even as they were being convicted by Antiochus.

Mark adopts the "bi-focal" apocalyptic perspective of Daniel: there is not one courtroom in which the believer stands, but two. This explains how Mark can present the Human One simultaneously as both defendant (8:31) and prosecutor (8:38)! Apocalyptic faith gives not only meaning, but empowerment through the mysterious efficacy of nonviolent suffering: To die (rather than to kill) for justice in history somehow advances the vindication glimpsed in the heavenly court. This also helps us understand Jesus' concluding promise that "this generation will see the sovereignty of God come in power" (9:1), which alludes to Jesus' crucifixion. Only apocalyptic faith can help us see that at the very moment the Powers *appear* to have triumphed, Jesus' nonviolent power has begun to unravel their rule of domination.