

Silence round the edges (sermon on Mark 6.30-34, 53-56)

You may have noticed that the stories of St. Mark's gospel have a peculiar characteristic. They don't follow on very well: you have one, then another, but where another writer might connect them with phrases like, "Two days later," or "Because of that," Mark tends not to. Chapter Six - which we've just heard part of - is typical. It has the rejection at Nazareth, the Mission of the Twelve, the death of John the Baptist, the feeding of the 5000, the walking on water, and the healings at Gennesaret which we heard at the end. Between each story - simply a gap. Silence. (In fact, the chapter is so disconnected that today's reading actually leaves out a chunk in the middle, about the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on water, and you wouldn't even notice that it was more disjointed than usual.)

These gaps in Mark have an important effect, because what we lose are the explanations and connections which in ordinary stories help us to understand and believe in what we're being told. The beginning of the gospel is a good example. Mark announces:

"John the Baptist appeared in the desert." If we ask where he came from - why Jesus came to him - silence. When Jesus calls the disciples, he seems just to walk past and call them and they come. Why? We don't know.

If we're not given reasons and explanations for the events of the gospel, we only have two alternatives. Either we can walk away in bafflement, or we can stay and have faith that there is a point to what Mark is describing. And right from his first line, Mark demands that we have faith. "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God," he says. How do we know he's the Son of God? Only by faith. Matthew and Luke probably thought Mark demanded a bit too much on trust, because they sometimes add reasons for believing. Matthew often says that Jesus is fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy; Luke has Jesus marked out as special from before birth, when an angel appeared to Mary. But where they give reasons, Mark is silent.

There is another kind of silence which is also important to Mark: the silence of the desert. The desert is always hovering on the edge of Mark's story, just as it must have hovered on the edge of everyday life in Palestine. Jesus is always trying to get away into the desert, or up a deserted mountain, to pray. He tries twice in the reading we had today. Sometimes he manages it and sometimes he doesn't, but the desert is always there in the background, a kind of giant silence behind all Jesus's words and activity.

At important moments the desert, or the mountains, move to centre-stage. In Chapter One Jesus goes into the desert to struggle with the devil. In Chapter Three he takes the disciples up a mountain to appoint the Twelve and send them on their first mission. In Chapter Nine he climbs a mountain with Peter, James and John and the Transfiguration happens there. Before his death, he goes up onto the Mount of Olives to pray, and at his death, of course, he climbs the hill of Golgotha. Here in Chapter Six, he goes once into a "deserted place" with the disciples and once alone.

But the thing about the desert is that it is also a place which demands faith. It takes a lot of faith to believe in a prophet or a Messiah who comes out of the desert: comes, literally and metaphorically, out of nowhere. It must have taken a lot of faith for the disciples, and it still does for us. What did anyone know about Jesus at the beginning of his ministry? He was a man who came out of the desert and continually went back there.

Two things must have helped the disciples and also help us. One is that the desert is so important in Israelite and Jewish history. Moses led the people through the desert to the promised land. Isaiah and Elijah and the prophets spent time in the desert. God had often spoken from the mountains of the desert. Good things came out of the desert, and when Jesus went into the desert or up into the mountains, he was going where Jews had always gone to meet God.

The other thing which helps is that every time Jesus goes into the desert and comes back, something important happens. Sometimes it's a miracle, like the feeding of the 5000 or the walking on the water which we didn't hear today - or the healings which we did. Sometimes it's a crucial new piece of teaching, like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, or the passage after the Transfiguration in Mark when Jesus begins to explain to the disciples that he is going to die and rise again. Sometimes it's something which reveals more of Jesus's nature, like the Holy Spirit descending on him at baptism. So the desert, which seems silent and barren, is really a place where Jesus is refreshed and renewed, and new ideas are born. And every time the disciples or other people have faith in the man who has come out of the desert, their faith is very soon justified. And that pattern is enormously important because the whole story of Jesus' life and death is building up to something which will demand the greatest possible faith. At the end of the story we're asked to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and transformed the whole world in a kind of single comprehensive healing miracle.

If you think about the very end of Mark: in a sense, death is the greatest desert, the greatest silence of all. Two days and nights of nothing. And then the women come, right at the beginning of day, to find that Jesus has got up and walked out of the desert of death. We can understand why they are amazed, but in a way, they don't need to be and nor do we, because the story follows a pattern which Mark has described so many times before. Jesus has gone into a desert to meet God, he has come back, a miracle has occurred, a new teaching, a new revelation of his identity. Only this time it's the final miracle, the final piece of teaching, and his nature is fully revealed.

Out of the silence of the desert comes the Messiah. Out of the silence of death comes salvation. And out of the silence of the empty page comes Mark's story which asks us to have faith. It's extraordinary how little attention we give to silence in our everyday lives, considering that we couldn't do without it. After all, if everyone is talking at once in a room, you can't hear anyone speak. If the words of the Bible covered every inch of the page and there were no gaps between letters or words, imagine how difficult it would be to read. We need those blank white spaces between every word and all round the edge of the page. And we need a certain amount of space in life - time for sleeping, or thinking, or listening, or just being, quietly. It's when you stop dashing about yourself that you can see the rest of the world more clearly, whether it's moving or still. When you stop talking you can hear something other than your own voice. And when you stop doing things, you are open to having things done for you and to you, by other people, but also by God.

But it takes a lot of faith to believe in the importance of doing nothing, of the desert in everyday life. It's so much easier to believe in action, and think that it's the times when we say and do a lot that are important. The Quakers have a wonderful saying: "Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be the same as great busyness." In the same spirit, St. Mark asks us again and again to remember the desert. He shows

how all the most important stages of Jesus' ministry come out of his desert times, and how it's in the desert that God acts most strongly on him.

There are better and worse and happier and less happy deserts. An afternoon off or a holiday can be a desert. But you can also be in the desert because you have lost something precious, your home or your job or someone you love. Jesus also had good and bad deserts - deserts he wanted to go to and deserts he was forced into. But in the gospels, something good comes out of every one of them, and that's what we have to hang on to. Whether they're good or bad, deserts are always close to God, and we can always hope that out of our desert times, something important for our lives will come. So since this is the time of summer holidays and lazy afternoons in the garden, we might remember the invitation in today's gospel:

"Come away to a deserted place and rest awhile." Come away and rest awhile, because the desert you are in is holy ground. Amen

© Teresa Morgan 2003