

22.07.2018
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

In contrast to the high drama of last week's gospel, today's passage seems a rather tame affair comprising mainly of summaries. Whilst this section of the chapter contains some equally dramatic events, the account of Jesus feeding the 5,000 and then walking over the turbulent waters of Lake Galilee to join his disciples and calm the storm is omitted. However this allows us to focus instead on other less dramatic aspects of the other stories which mark the beginning of a more public phase of Jesus' ministry – for example the ways in which he inhabits and uses different places – and reflect on what insights they might give us as we continue to develop our idea of a spirituality of conflict.

Preparation

Think through a typical day and make a list of some of the different places in which you might find yourself. For each place you identify, try and write a short description of its function, of the attitudes and ideas which it invokes when you are in it, and the activities which are usually associated with it. Then choose one place and try and imagine using it for something completely different – what sorts of things might possibly happen as a result?

or

Visit a favourite place and spend some time reflecting on how you inhabit and use it.

Text

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the

marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Comment

Mark mentions two distinctly different types of place in his summaries of the events leading up to the feeding and storm miracles and of what followed after these: in the opening one we encounter *er mos* – the ‘deserted place’ of vv31 & 32 to which he invites the disciples; and in the second we find *agora* – the marketplace(s) of v 56, in which he heals the sick.

There can be a temptation when considering this dichotomy to think of it purely in terms of interior/exterior: the need to balance reflection and action – time with God and time in the world. However the way Jesus inhabits and uses these spaces is more varied and can also sometimes have a more subversive edge.

If we look first at *er mos*, we tend to associate the word with Jesus only in the context of prayer – of his spending private time in conversation with God at critical moments. But whilst this is certainly the case in Mark 1: 35 and Luke 5:16, it is only one way in which Jesus makes use of the lonely (solitary; uninhabited; desolate; wilderness) places. We also see him using them as a way of escaping from the press of the crowds or the hostile attentions of the religious leaders (Mark 1:45; Luke 5:15–16; John 11:24). And in the narrative in front of us, his clear intent in the opening verses is not to take the disciples away for a debrief and reflection – that conversation has already happened in v30 – but to give them chance to take a breather and recharge. They have just returned from their first ‘solo’ (i.e without Jesus) foray in the name of the Kingdom travelling from place to place, exorcising demons and healing the sick. Mark indicates with the verb *anapau*, that what they need is a chance to rest and eat, and that Jesus acts to ensure this happens by taking them to ‘a deserted place’. We can’t tell from the text whether he succeeds: the way in which v33 follows seems to indicate that the plan was interrupted, but this could simply be one of Mark’s narrative ploys for introducing his characteristic sense of urgency and pace into the text. However, the intent of seeking a solitary place for the purpose of rest is clear.

But the passage also gives us a further and very different pointer, one rooted in the resonances Mark has set up in this chapter between Jesus and John the Baptist, and reinforced by his earlier linkage (1:15) of the arrest of John with the emergence of Jesus: John’s sense of identity is formed and developed in the wilderness (Luke 1:80) – the lonely place’ – and it is from there that he also announces the advent of God’s Kingdom (Mark 1:3–4). In the same way, as we saw in our reflection for [Lent 1](#), the wilderness place is where Jesus also goes, not to rest but to wrestle – to explore, test and temper his own sense of identity, vocation, and purpose; and from which he then returns to launch his public mission (Mark 1:14–15).

This leads us on to a consideration of how Jesus uses the market place in that mission. The noun *agora* has roots in a verb *ageiró* – to gather together – and this is reflected in its usage in the New Testament to denote not just the place in a town or village where goods were bought and sold, but also one where various public activities such as elections, trials (Acts 16:19) and debates (Acts 17:17) took place. In other words it was both a commercial and a political space. Then – as indeed now – such places were largely under the control of those with wealth, position, and power.

However what we see in v.56 is an overturning of this narrative brought about by the change in tone and tempo of Jesus’ mission, arising from the various events which Mark has unfolded across this chapter. Wherever Jesus goes, this central place of power and privilege now becomes the domain of the marginalised, the weak, and the vulnerable. It becomes the stage on which Jesus overturns the economies of the world and replaces them with the economy of God’s Kingdom. It also makes more explicit the critique of those who enrich themselves at the expense of the needy – those whose welfare should be their concern according to the principle of *sh lôm* – which Mark encodes in Jesus’ reaction to the crowd in v34 (with its echoes of Ezekiel 34: 1–16.)

We could also see the words and actions of Jesus as turning the commercial place – by definition a place revolving chiefly around individual interests – into the place of

community: a place where people help one another towards healing encounter; where those who have been marginalised or even excluded from society by their illness are restored to their place within the web of social connection. In effect Jesus subverts the commercial and political narratives associated with the market place and turns it instead into a place where the principles of the Kingdom and its *sh lôm* direct the action.

How then might Mark's pointers towards Jesus' use of private and public space help us as we try to grow in our understandings of, and responses to, the conflicts in which we become involved? I want to suggest four areas for further reflection and work:

Firstly that we simply need to become more aware of the different places – both public and private – which are involved in the dynamics and process of conflict and our responses to this. If we are not even aware of them, then it is difficult to be proactive about how we will move from one to another, or to be intentional in how we make use of the places in which we find ourselves.

Secondly that we sometimes need to actively choose and pursue a move from one sort of place into another. It can be all too easy to assume the necessity of our active presence/participation in a situation; or to neglect our own needs/safety/health etc. – particularly when we are caught up in a dynamic (and possibly exciting) situation.

Thirdly that we could think more creatively about how we indwell and utilise the different spaces in which we find ourselves. There might be a much bigger range of possibilities than we initially imagine, and which might give us more degrees of freedom within which to think and work; or even perhaps a completely different – possibly even counterintuitive – way in which a particular type of place can be used to expand our understanding or develop our skills.

Finally that the narratives attached to different sorts of places do not necessarily need to be determinative for either our thought or our praxis. We might need to give consideration to whether and how things which we take for granted can be questioned and changed. Indeed the overturning of established narratives – particularly those of privilege and power – is one of the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God which Mark sets out for us.

Response

Choose one of the four suggestions above and consider it in connection with a conflict in which you have recently been or are currently still involved. You might find it helpful with some of these to do this using pictures/diagrams as a way of capturing your thoughts.

Is there anything which comes out of this exercise which might help you in a future situation?

or

Choose a favourite place (interpret this how you like!) – it could be one which you find relaxing, or energising, or creative etc – and spend some time there on a number of occasions this week, trying to inhabit it as consciously/intentionally/fully as you can.

Prayer

**Jesus, our pattern
you continually show us
how to live and act
more creatively.**

May we always be aware
of the constraints and possibilities
of the different places
in which we find ourselves;
and, like you
may we be ready
to think and act
with insight and imagination,
so that new stories
might be written,
new ways opened up,
and new possibilities
brought into being.
Amen