

21.10.2018
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

We may well have a sense of déjà vu as we read today's passage – and with good reason! Mark has taken us through similar territory on two previous occasions in this central section of his Gospel. Such three-fold reiterations are just one of a host of narrative devices which the Evangelist uses to reveal to his readers the identity and true nature of Jesus and his Kingdom. For us, the story of the disciples' continuing failure to understand any of this, and of Jesus' different tactics for trying to overcome this deficit, provides another useful lens through which to examine some of the dynamics which can shape our responses to conflict situations. Mark's different storytelling techniques can also be a useful tool for thinking about how we can better help others (and ourselves!) to see or grasp different perspectives or expand understandings of a situation.

Preparation:

Try any or all of the following:

1) Find a copy of one or more of these classic optical illusions (they are all readily available online): the Rabbit/Duck illusion; the Rubin Vase illusion; the Old/Young Woman illusion. In the ones you looked at, which image did you see/see first? Why do you think this was? If you were able to see both of the images, what did you have to do to swap between them?

Now see if you call to mind a scenario where, without getting any new/different information, you suddenly saw a situation completely differently? Can you identify the moment when the switch occurred and what caused it?

2) Look for a film clip called 'The Missing Gorilla' and watch it. Why did you miss seeing the gorilla on your first view? Once you know the gorilla is there can you make yourself see it if you watch the clip again and if so, how? Can you recall a scenario when you missed something which was in plain sight? What prevented you from seeing it?

3) Find some willing friends and have a quick turn of charades or Pictionary. Note your sensations when you are trying to convey the information to others and when you are trying to decipher the clues someone else is giving you. What are the similarities or differences?

Text

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;

but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Comment

There are actually three verses missing between last week's section from Mark 10 and the passage we have today. Perhaps the lectionary compilers leave them out because we have already heard something very similar in the passages for **Lent 2** and **Proper 19**; perhaps it is because the crux of this passage is often seen as being the final verse, with everything else being primarily a vehicle to get us to that point. However verses 32–34 are actually critical in setting the context for this exchange between Jesus, James, and John because they connect it into an important sequence which Mark uses to clarify and sharpen the understanding of his readers.

We have already noted in previous reflections Mark's consummate skill as a story teller and the way in which he takes his readers on a journey which gradually discloses the hidden truth about Jesus and about the nature of his Messiahship and Kingdom (both rather different to the traditional expectations). Along the way he has various different ways of snagging our attention and jolting us into a shift of perspective. The obtuseness of the disciples is one of a number of narrative devices he uses to further this end.

Today's passage is one of a set of three in the central section of Mark's Gospel (8:22 – 10:52) in which Jesus predicts his suffering and death. Threefold repetition in which each reiteration expands the detail and thus amplifies the message is a characteristic Marcan manoeuvre. Thus Mark 8:31 tells us simply that Jesus will suffer, be rejected, killed, and rise again; 9:31 adds in the element of betrayal; and 10:32 brings the further details of mocking, spitting and scourging. The first two of these passion predictions are also associated with significant events – Peter's confession of Christ in Chapter 8 and the Transfiguration in Chapter 9 (and perhaps this latter is also in the minds of James and John here: their request to be on the right and left hand of Christ in glory immediately calls to mind Moses and Elijah in the mountain top event). However on each occasion the disciples respond

in a way which shows how completely and utterly they have failed to understand the nature of either Jesus' kingship or his Kingdom.

This failure is perhaps particularly striking here following as it does not just Jesus' most explicit description of his coming humiliation and death, but also his exchange with the rich young ruler (and its implicit call for the dismantling of systems based on wealth power and privilege – see further at **Proper 23**), and his statement that the Kingdom of God belongs to 'such as these [little children]' i.e. to those with no power or position. Mark's technique of stringing together a series of different and yet connected episodes like this (known as parataxis) is another of his characteristic techniques and here it serves to throw into very sharp relief the lack of understanding of the disciples.

If we look at these three related stories we can see that different factors are at work in their failure to grasp what Jesus is trying to tell them: pre-commitments to particular understandings of the Messiah; a preoccupation with, and focus on, particular social aspects and dimensions such as status and the location of power; and a complete blindness to the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the Kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus, in which greatness inheres not in exacting service from others but in giving it.

In each instance we also see Jesus (like Mark himself) use different tactics in an effort to help them to a correct understanding of the situation: thus in Mark 8 (31; 34–8) we find him explaining clearly and explicitly what being the Messiah is going to entail both for himself and for those who follow him; in the following chapter (Mark 9: 35–37) he offers only a minimal commentary but instead uses a (physically present) child as a visual illustration of what he wants them to grasp. The episode in today's Gospel sees him using (and then inverting) a more sociological framework in which to set his explanation about the nature of the Kingdom.

One can imagine how frustrating these exchanges might sometimes have been for Jesus (think back to your charades/pictionary exercise), but eventually (long after the reader of Mark's narrative) we know that the disciples *do* get it: with the resurrection, the most powerful clue of all, the penny will eventually drop and James and John will at last understand what sharing in the baptism – the full immersion of Jesus in the life and dynamics of the world – really means.

As I suggested in the introduction, it is from seeing how Jesus attempts to shift the perspective of his disciples, and how Mark approaches the same task with his readers (as for example in connection with these passion prediction passages), rather than the *specific* subject matter of today's reading, that we can draw some useful insights to help us pinpoint things which can impede progress in understanding and resolving conflicts.

Understanding the different narratives involved is an important part of understanding the shape of any conflict and of seeing the different possibilities for how resolution might be worked towards. However – just as was the case with the disciples in these three episodes – sometimes our preconceptions and pre-commitments hinder our capacity to properly or fully understand something; or they can keep us rooted in a perspective which prevents us from appreciating other possible interpretations of a situation; at other times we can miss something in plain sight because our attention is firmly held by something else – an idea, task, or relationship for example – on which we are fixated.

Just as with the optical illusions we looked at in preparation, different things may be required in order to show us our blindspots, bring about a change of perspective, or draw our attention away from a specific focus so that something which was formerly invisible to us can come into view. Sometimes what is needed is a clear explanation; sometimes something visual or non-verbal in other ways can be useful. Occasionally we may need something unexpected which jolts the consciousness into a change of perspective; at other times we may need to very deliberately help people (or be helped ourselves) to break out of a fixity of attention to the small or specific which is preventing us from seeing what is happening in the bigger picture

It can also be useful to think carefully about the way in which we present any material we use in situations where we are trying to work towards better understandings in a conflict situation. As we have noted here and previously, Mark uses many different techniques – some at the meta level (e.g. in the framing of his overall narrative arc) and some within the individual sections or stories themselves – as a way of drawing his readers' attention to specific areas, reinforcing important

points, encouraging leaps of understanding, and helping the making of connections. Similarly if we are to maximise the chances of reaching a better mutual understanding we also may also need to use a range of different techniques to clarify positions, facilitate question formation, or stimulate constructive discussion.

Understanding a conflict narrative/situation can involve a complex journey and there simply is no one-size approach which will cover and cater for every situation; moreover understanding is very rarely reached at the first attempt: application, persistence, and imagination of the kind displayed by both Jesus and Mark are vital elements in any attempt to facilitate progress towards it.

Response

Set aside some time to read Mark's gospel right through, paying particular attention to the different ways in which both the Marcan Jesus and Mark himself, as the narrator, try to shift our perspectives on/broaden and deepen our understandings of the identity of Jesus, the purpose of his mission, and the nature of his Kingdom (you might also find it helpful to look back at some of the previous reflections on Mark's gospel which comment on this particular aspect of it).

Is there anything here which might be a useful tool or tactic in trying to shift perspectives about an area of conflict (great or small, public or private) in which you are involved? How might you bring it to bear on that situation?

Or perhaps you have seen something which challenges you as to whether you yourself might not be seeing a picture clearly for one reason or another. Are there actions you could take to clarify or deepen your grasp of the situation and your own reactions and responses to it? How could you put these in practice? (note that we often need help from a trusted other when trying to be critically reflective on our own attitudes and praxis).

Prayer

Jesus –

confounder of expectations
and clarifier of confusions –

help us escape the limitations
which come from preconceived ideas
which we cannot relinquish,

the narrowness of vision
which comes from preoccupation
with unimportant things,

so that we may
better see and understand
the great story of your Kingdom

and in so seeing,
inhabit more fully
its rich dimensions

and depths.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills