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Introduction

In our reflections this Lent we are exploring different aspects of the hidden/revealed dichotomy which threads through the lectionary texts for year B. These can then become a lens which we can bring to bear on our understandings of, responses to, or behaviour in, situations of conflict, both great and small. We might want to think of this as a particular element within the larger 'life audit' which the season traditionally encourages.

Hiddenness is a well-recognised *leitmotif* of Mark's narrative, with many of Jesus' actions or words being followed by injunctions to silence or secrecy. However there is also a counterbalancing theme of revelation (in both private and public contexts) which is equally important to the dynamic of the Gospel. Today's reading draws on both of these, as for the first time the disciples appear to finally see who Jesus really is. However, like the blind man in Mk 8: 24, their seeing is distorted, hampered by other narratives and their associated expectations.

If you are following the alternative reading set for today, you will find a reflection on this by the Rev. Sarah Hills [here](#)

Preparation

Think of a situation – pleasant or unpleasant – in which you discovered that either a person or a project were not what you had originally imagined them to be. Spend a few minutes reflecting on your emotions, thoughts, and actions when your perspective shifted and noting anything which particularly stands out. Has this experience coloured how you have approached things subsequently?

Text

Mark 8:31–38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my

sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Comment

Today's Gospel reading marks a change in the tone and content of Mark's narrative – and the fulcrum is Peter's confession of Christ which has immediately preceded it. To get a clearer understanding of what is going on here, it's helpful to pull back the focus and start with an overview of Mark's gospel.

After a short introduction (1:1–15), this falls into 3 main sections: in the first (1:16–8:21) Jesus enacts and explains the Kingdom of God through 'acts of power' (*dunameis*), preaching, and parabolic teachings; in the middle section (8:22–10:52) the emphasis shifts to a threefold prediction of his suffering and death coupled with radical teachings about what this entails for those who would follow him; and finally we move to the Passion narrative itself and the death of Jesus (11:1–16:8). Today's Gospel reading thus sits very near to the beginning of the second major division.

It's also worth noting the *inclusio* which Mark uses in connection with this section as this too helps shed light on the passage. This literary device was a classic way of bookending a section of the text (chapter and verse divisions are Western impositions dating from the 13th and 16th Century respectively) in which the writer uses an identical phrase or idea at both the beginning and end of a section to indicate the purpose and focus of the intervening passage. Everything in between is thus to be read with the highlighted theme in mind. In fact Mark also does this on a much larger scale as well: he opens his Gospel by announcing that it is about **'Jesus Christ, the Son of God'** (1:1), and as Jesus dies, the onlooking Centurion announces **'Truly, this man was God's Son'** (15:39). Everything which Mark does in between these two points is about disclosing the hidden truth about Jesus – not only that he is the Messiah but also showing what the term actually means in the economy of God rather than in that of the traditional nationalistic narratives.

If we return to the central section of the Gospel which holds today's passage, its bookends are two stories in which Jesus heals a man born blind. These have interesting differences which can also help us in our exploration here. In the opening story (8: 22–26), the man is 'brought to Jesus' by others; the healing is private and happens in stages – initially the man misunderstands the sensory information his newly functioning eyes are giving him (people are 'like trees walking'); a further touch from Jesus leads him to *'look intently'* and it is only after this that we are told that 'his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly'. The concluding story (10:46– 52) is very different: no-one brings Bartimaeus – he throws off his cloak, springs up, and comes to Jesus himself, a striking description given that at this stage he is still blind. The healing is very public and his sight is regained instantaneously – though interestingly he recognises Jesus as the Messiah ('Son of David' is a Messianic title) before his physical sight is restored.

So Mark is indicating that this narrative section in which our reading sits is about gaining 'sight' in some way – seeing that which has hitherto been hidden from us; and moreover that while this might not happen easily or all in one go, eventually his readers will see what he is dedicated to revealing – the true nature and purpose of Jesus. The opening section of his Gospel has been full of stories of exorcisms, healings, and other 'acts of power'. It is as if Jesus is showing his disciples (and Mark is showing us) what the Kingdom of God is about. This is also the section where all of the injunctions to secrecy in connection with healing miracles occur, as well as many of those relating to the teaching parables. There has been much debate about whether the 'messianic secret' was a theological device Mark deliberately employed and the possible reasons for this. However it seems likely that there were various reasons for Jesus' request for secrecy (which was often ignored anyway!) One of these was that the purpose of such acts might be

misunderstood by those seeing them, and thus misappropriated to serve narratives and ends which were very different from those which Jesus had in mind. One possible indication of this is seen in the response to the feeding miracle earlier in Chapter 8. Mark only says that Jesus ‘immediately sent them away’ – a surprisingly abrupt action considering what had just occurred – but we know from the story in John 6 that in a similar situation the crowd wanted him ‘make him king’.

It is against this background that Jesus asks his disciples ‘who do you say I am?’ – the last in a series of questions in which their answers have revealed their almost complete incomprehension. The previous question however has elicited three not inappropriate answers – Jesus has indeed behaved in ways reminiscent of the prophets, he has said things which have recalled the words of the Baptist, and his words and actions might really be those of an Elijah heralding the return of God’s chosen champion. Finally though, in response to this last question, Peter manages to somehow make a further leap forward into grasping and articulating something different. He uses the title *Christos* (Anointed One/Messiah) – the first time that the word has been used by Mark since the opening sentence of his Gospel. Peter’s choice of terminology is interesting because nothing that Jesus has done really reflects the actions which are associated with ‘The Christ’ in the intertestamental texts. It is as if Peter suddenly makes a connection between a half-grasped sense that Jesus is different and a central paradigm from his own world-view – but it is one which is totally wrong.

What follows in verses 32 & 33 shows that while Peter has begun to see who Jesus *is*, he totally fails to understand what this really *means*. True he is seeing something he has not previously seen and for which he has some terminology but, like the blind man in the opening *inclusio* story, his vision is distorted by the narratives in which he himself is caught. Ideas about the Messiah at this time were deeply rooted in the history of the Jewish people with its episodes of conquest, exile, and oppression. This Messiah would be a triumphant figure who would destroy Israel’s enemies, free and restore Jerusalem, and make Palestine the centre of the world. A new age of peace and goodness would ensue – but it would come in the train of a violent and nationalistic struggle involving vengeance and destruction spearheaded by the Messiah. It is therefore incomprehensible to Peter and the others that Jesus should talk in terms of it being *the Messiah himself* who must suffer and die. The accompanying teaching on what it will mean for them to follow this way (which is also now given to others as well as the disciples) must have been equally disorientating and disconcerting.

We will see the same dynamic again on the two further occasions in this section where Jesus again explains his Messiahship to them in terms of suffering and death, and accompanies these with teachings which invert all their understandings and expectations. They know Jesus is different – they begin to see what has previously been hidden – but they do not yet see what it really means since their viewpoint is rooted within the economy of the world (and specifically of nationalistic expectations) and not the economy of God. However from this moment onwards all of Jesus’ actions and words, and all of Mark’s narrative, will be directed towards helping them, and us, to ‘*look intently*’ in order to see Jesus clearly and thus to understand not only what his mission really is, but also what it entails for those who would follow this Messiah. For the disciples this final clarity is only achieved with the death of Jesus – though they do not actually appear the crucifixion scenes. It is left to the centurion who ‘stood facing him’ – the words suggest looking directly at him and thus another echo of ‘*look[ing] intently*’ – to articulate the formerly hidden truth which Mark’s gospel has now brought into clear view: not only is Jesus the Messiah, but what this means is radically different from what had been previously supposed.

There are a number of insights here which we might usefully draw on as we come to reflect on our responses to and behaviour in situations of conflict:

Firstly we need to bear in mind that our vision and understanding about a situation – particularly one in which we feel under threat – might not be as clear or as informed as we think. This can be a particular danger when we have a flash of insight into a situation and suddenly see the world or a set of events or connections in a completely different light, because such moments have a tremendous emotional power. But while it might very well be that some deep intuition has made a connection which is inaccessible to our conscious cognition, this does not necessarily mean that it is either wholly or even partially correct. We need to bring our critical faculties to bear on such insights, and indeed open them up to the close scrutiny of trusted friends or colleagues – in essence we need to look again and to *look intently* – before we take any action which is based solely on them.

Secondly – and this is a point we have considered many times before but which bears repeating – we need to become increasingly more aware of our own *weltanschauungen* – the world views and their associated narratives within which our thinking and responses are situated. These are often totally hidden to us: we may think it is simply ‘the way the world is’, but this is not the case. I have a very clear recollection of a pivotal moment in my life when I realised that all my questions about something were based on a set of assumptions that I had never even realised I had – let alone questioned! It was the start of a new and expanded thought journey. These unseen and thus unexamined assumptions about how the world is, how things work, and what things mean, can often impede our progress to clearer understandings and better courses of action. This is particularly the case when we encounter differences of one kind or another, particularly if we feel threatened by these in some way. Sometimes, like the disciples, we need the help of others if we are to be confronted with and challenged about the validity of these ideas. This can be, as it was for them, a deeply unsettling experience, particularly as we come to see the extent to which our responses to others are rooted in stereotypes or prejudices. However it is an important part of the journey to a better understanding of both ourselves and others, and one which will help us to live, speak, and act, in ways which are consonant with the Kingdom of the Messiah whom we seek to follow.

Response

Revisit the situation you considered at the beginning, or call to mind a situation of conflict in which you have been involved, and try to tease out any preconceptions you brought to the situation. In what ways did they shape your emotional reactions or influence your actions and was this a positive or a negative thing? Are there any understandings or attitudes which you feel you might, perhaps with the help of a trusted friend, benefit from exploring and examining further?

Prayer

Jesus, the disconcerter,
help us to be prepared
to question our beliefs and assumptions
even when this is unsettling;
may our own deeply cherished ideas
never stand in the way
of the ones you want us to understand;
and may we always be ready
to look, and look, and look again
until we see clearly
the path you are trying to show us.
Amen