



The Gospel of Mark

Mark 8:27 – 10:52: Who is He? Who are We?

Everything we have learned about Mark suggests that he was an author who shaped his story carefully. In his time as in our own thoughtful authors often put the climactic moment in their story right in the middle, so that the chapters before lead up to that dramatic moment and the chapters afterward lead from that moment to the conclusion of the story.

Right in the middle of Mark's Gospel is Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Messiah!" In order to understand the place of this confession in Mark's Gospel we need to raise three issues.

1. Why does Jesus ask this question?
2. Does Peter get the answer right?
3. Why does Jesus get so angry at Peter?

Why Does Jesus Ask this Question?

The traditional answer is that Jesus asks this question in order to quiz the disciples. He knows what the right answer is and he wants to tease it from those who follow him – for their sake. If we want to follow many early theologians who think Jesus knew everything, then surely he asks this question in order to improve the disciples' understanding.

The less traditional answer is that Jesus asks this question because he is working out his own identity. Mark had not read Erik Erikson, or any other of the psychologists we know, so he probably did not know that part of maturing is having an "identity crisis." But Mark has been concerned all along with establishing Jesus' identity. God calls Jesus God's son at the baptism in chapter 1, the demoniac calls him "Son of the Most High God" in chapter 5. Maybe Jesus asks the disciples because he is working his way toward his own mission. In the light of Peter's answer he has a better sense of who he is, and a clearer sense of what he must do. He tells us what he must do when he tells Peter that the Son of Man must suffer many things.

Does Peter Get the Answer Right?

When Matthew retells this story, he leaves no doubt that Peter gets the answer right. Peter says that Jesus is not only the Messiah, he is the Son of the Living God, and Jesus says to Peter: “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father in heaven.” (Matthew 17:17). Grade: a definite A plus.

But when Mark tells the story, Jesus does not say one word of affirmation or condemnation. Peter says, “You are the Messiah,” and Jesus says, “don’t tell anyone.” That probably means “right, but let’s keep it a secret,” but it might mean “right, but not quite right enough. Don’t say another word until you get your story clearer.”

Jesus doesn’t help our uncertainty – or Peter’s – when he immediately refers to himself, not as the Messiah, but as the Son of Man. Is that another term for Messiah or is it a more complicated term? There is no doubt that for Mark Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. He says so in Mark 1:1. But he may be more than that, too – the Son of Man as Jesus says here; the Son of God, as God will say in the next chapter.

Peter gets the story partly right, but it’s more like a B minus than an A plus. As Mark has portrayed the disciples, B minus is not bad – for them. Maybe Mark tells us the story of the man who is blind and who Jesus heals one step at a time (in Mark 8:22-26) because the disciples are seeing who Jesus is a little bit slowly, foggily, one step at a time.

Why Does Jesus Get Angry at Peter?

Jesus gets angry at Peter because it is clear what Peter does not understand. He does not understand what is required of the one who is both Messiah and Son of Man. What is required is that he be rejected and suffer and die. Peter says: “God forbid.” Jesus says: “Get behind me, you Satan!”

That does not just mean, “You’re wrong again, Peter.” It means “don’t tempt me!” Satan is the tempter. Jesus would not say this if he did not find Peter’s alternative tempting: how about Messiahship with no suffering? Jesus resists the temptation; again, maybe he’s growing toward his own role as Son of Man and Son of God.

Peter may say “God forbid” partly because he does not want Jesus to suffer and partly because he knows full well that if Jesus is a persecuted Messiah, his followers will end up as persecuted disciples. Jesus confirms his worst fears in the very next paragraph: “If any would become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (8.34)

After Peter has weighed in on who Jesus is (Messiah) and Jesus has weighed in on who Jesus is (Son of Man) God weighs in on who Jesus is. At the Transfiguration the four disciples follow Jesus to the mountain and there they see him bathed in light and talking to Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah represent the whole history of Israel from the beginning until now – giver of the Law, the greatest of the prophets. But suddenly both the law and the prophets vanish leaving only Jesus – and God says, “This is my son, the beloved, listen to him.” Does God mean

“listen to him, along with Elijah and Moses?” or “listen to him instead of Elijah and Moses?” or “listen to him even more than Elijah and Moses?”

Our section ends with another blind man, Bartimaeus. Unlike the first blind man (unlike Peter and the disciples) he sees immediately, and he believes completely. Mark says from then on Bartimaeus follows Jesus “on the way.”

We have seen in these chapters what Jesus’ way looks like. It requires taking up a cross.

It requires coming down from the mountain and from our “mountain top experiences” to deal with a messy world where a young boy has seizures and his father is terrified. It requires being servant of one another, giving up all that bragging about greatness, promotions, salaries, which school they got into, or their children did.

The blind man at Bethsaida sees all this gradually. Bartimaeus sees all this immediately. The disciples are still stumbling around – Peter trying to wish away suffering, James and John trying to get VIP seats in the Kingdom, all of them fumbling when they should be praying.

How much do we see? How faithfully do we follow? Who do we say that He is?