

Mark the Evangelist Day
1/05/2011

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Deuteronomy 8:2 - 3, 11 - 16

Psalms 118

1 Peter 5:8 – 14

Mark 8:11 - 21

The mystery of the bread

A patronal festival is a time for reminding ourselves about the story of our adopted hero in the faith. As a Congregation we are fortunate in the choice of Mark the Evangelist. His legacy to the church includes stories about him and the Gospel of which he is the author.

The creation of edifying stories about the saints is as ancient as the Christian era. The lives of the saints were designed to honor the memory of faithful people, and encourage Christians facing persecution. This literature was not to be regarded as sober, accurate history in the modern sense but was colorful and inspirational, similar to the inspiring stories of pioneering days, or some of the stories told about Anzac.

Although he was not amongst the twelve disciples Mark the Evangelist is associated with them and is often identified with John Mark whose mother's house in Jerusalem [Acts 12:12] was a meeting place for the apostles. There is a strong tradition that Mark is the young man wearing a linen sheet who followed Christ after the disciples fled, and avoided capture by shedding his clothes. [Mark 14:51-52]. Mark was separately a missionary colleague of Peter, Paul, and his cousin Barnabas. He set out with Paul on the first missionary journey but due to conflict with him, broke away and returned to Jerusalem. Later Mark is mentioned as Paul's helper when he was captive in Rome [Col 4:10], and Peter refers to Mark as his son [1 Pet 5:13].

Although in later life he went to Alexandria founded churches and was probably martyred there, it is Mark's relationship with Peter and with Rome that is most significant for his Gospel. In Rome Mark was Peter's close companion, disciple and interpreter, and heard him preach. At the insistence of the Christians in Rome, he set down everything he remembered of Jesus' words and actions as he had learned them from Peter.

Mark is a very skilful writer whose primary message is that when Jesus' began ministry in Galilee the time had come: the Kingdom of God had come near [1:15b]. Everything else Mark proclaims aims to make clear the truth of these words. The chapters leading to the end of the reading for today contain stories about Jesus' works of power in which he healed people, cast out demons, and provided hungry people with bread. The message is that in him the healing, reconciling energy of God is at work, bringing the world into keeping with God's will for all.

The reading for today [8:11-21] is like a bookend. It concludes and explains a long section [commencing at 6:8] in which bread is referred to 16 times. In this section Jesus feeds two huge crowds: the first numbering 5000 people and the second of 4000. Each feeding takes place in a remote location that has been reached by crossing water. Even putting it that way rings a bell. Where did Israel encounter bread? In the wilderness: after crossing the Red Sea. So with Mark: this bread is God's provision for hungry people in a desolate place, beyond the threat of Kings and consuming waters.

But there is something else. In this extended story Jesus and the disciples cross the lake several times. At first they travel into Jewish territory, represented by the 5000 people, the five loaves and the twelve baskets left over [6:30-44]. Five is for books of the law, and 12 is for the tribes of Israel. In the second feeding there are 7 loaves, 7 baskets and the 4000 people [8:1-9]. Differently from the first time, a Greek word for basket was used, because Greeks had settled the region. Mark is telling us that when Jesus and the twelve visited different ethnically based communities an offer was being made. The possibility of a new social order came into existence in which Jew and Gentile shared the same loaf: the bread of reconciliation.

The challenge from the Pharisees that began our reading today comes immediately following this second feeding. The Pharisees' concern is usually about purity of religion so they may have been troubled about whom Jesus ate with. Their hostile request for a sign so incensed him he groaned aloud in frustration and refused to comply. But there was a deeper reason. The question parallels those Jesus experienced in the Temptations, one of which limited faith to reliance on proofs and put God under our control. No wonder Jesus likened the Pharisees' influence to yeast: an ingredient with the power to corrupt because it makes bread go stale and moldy. But it was not only the religious influence that was corrupting. Jesus spoke of Herod in the same way. The political sphere, which silenced John the Baptist, was just as bad. The time had come but the Kingdom had its opponents. Being on this journey with Jesus was like being in a boat in harrowing waters.

The Pharisees were bad enough, but when Jesus and the disciples set off in the boat again he launched into a tirade against them because of their difficulty over whether they had enough bread. The sentence that triggered the incident contains an apparent textual problem: "*Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they only had one loaf with them in the boat*" [8:14]. The words say the disciples had forgotten to bring any "breads"; yet they had "one loaf" with them. Jesus' tirade is profoundly related to the interpretation of what is meant by the "one loaf" the 12 had with them. He asks: "*Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?*" In Jesus' harshest criticism of the disciples so far he asks if they had willfully turned against him and quotes the prophets' words to them about senseless people with no faculties and no understanding.

Whenever bread or blindness is used in this text, more than one meaning is present. For Mark Jesus' "works of power" are manifestations of God at work that can be understood – "seen" – by people of faith. Paradoxically, those who have eyes but lack the sight of faith are those who cannot see. Jesus' anger with the disciples was because they had not yet comprehended that what they needed most was the "single loaf" they had with them – the bread of life that had come down from heaven.

In Mark's writing this reading measures a stage of understanding in Jesus' relationship with the disciples: they don't really get it yet, which is a worry, because they are not very different from the Pharisees. But all is not lost. Next to this bookmark stands the first of another two that give us a hint at what happens in the next section of Mark's Gospel.

The next bookmark is about a blind man who at Jesus' touch came to see in stages. The one following at the end of the section is about blind Bartimaeus who recognized Jesus for who he was despite the fact he could not see.

As a young man Mark may have known the frustrations of coming to understand the deeper meaning of who Jesus is for us. As an Evangelist he may have known the frustration of teaching others to understand what he had learned. What he shows us is that despite the setbacks Jesus continued with his mission of announcing, in word and deed that the Kingdom had come near. He did so to the end, and the final time he refers to the "one loaf" is during the Last Supper when he gives the bread to the twelve and says: "*Take; this is my body*" [14:22].

We are here today because of the grace of this gift: a body broken for us, and a life poured out. Wherever people came to trust in his death and rising they found themselves mysteriously fed and nourished in a living community of reconciliation where differences that we think are so important, no longer have a place. Thanks be to God for this gift.
