

Life in Mission

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Context

The sequence of Gospel texts in this part of Ordinary Time serves as a reminder we are not simply moving from chapter to chapter, story to story in the *Gospel according to Mark*. Consider the sequence of passages assigned to these summer Sundays (in juxtaposition with all the verses of Mark):

- 12th Sunday Mark 4:35-41, Jesus calms the storm on the waters
 Mark 5:1-20, Jesus casts out the Gerasene demoniac (*only used in 4th Week, Monday*)
- 13th Sunday Mark 5:21-43, Jairus and the woman with a hemorrhage
- 14th Sunday Mark 6:1-6, Jesus rejected in his own home town
- 15th Sunday Mark 6:7-13, Jesus sends out the missionaries
 Mark 6:14-29, Herod’s questions about Jesus and execution of John the Baptist (*only used in 4th Week, Friday*)
- 16th Sunday Mark 6:30-34, The missionaries returns and Jesus takes them to rest**
 Mark 6:35-44, Jesus miraculously feeds the 5,000
- 17th Sunday John 6:1-15, miraculous feeding of the people (the readings from John continue through the 21st Sunday)

Given the length of Mark’s narrative – the shortest of the four canonical gospels – when Mark arrives at the miraculous feeding (6:35-44; note: there is a second miracle in 8:1-10), the sequence of Sunday gospels shifts over to the Johannine account which offers a richer consideration of the only miracle that appears in all four gospels.

From above, you’ll notice that Mark has constructed a sequence from 6:1 through v.34 that seems cohesive, but then not really. The pericope with Herod and the death of John the Baptist almost seems out of place. And then we have our vv.30-34 that is positioned between all that comes and goes from this chapter. This section has bedeviled scholars who continue to debate how to understand the Markan intent. Lane [224] writes:

The decision to divide Ch. 6:30–44 at verse 34 is one of convenience, which permits a consideration of the return of the disciples and the withdrawal to a wilderness-place before attention is concentrated upon the feeding of the multitude. The degree of variation displayed in modern treatments of this question indicates the relative difficulty of discerning the evangelist’s intention. The division adopted presupposes that Mark has prefaced the feeding miracle by two small introductory passages which are thematically united. The first describes the return of the disciples and their rest in a wilderness-place (Ch. 6:30–32), while the second tells of the gathering of the multitudes to the wilderness and Jesus’ compassion upon them (Ch. 6:33–34).

I think Lane nicely titles these two sections of Mark's gospel as:

The Provision of Rest in the Wilderness (Mark 6:30-34)

The Provision of Bread in the Wilderness (Mark 6:35-44)

I think it is this vein that our short passage serves to "round off" the missioning of the Twelve (in 6:7-13). It also prepares Mark's readers for the rest of chapter 6, which features two closely related and marvelous manifestations of Jesus' identity as their Lord: first, as the one who feeds his people abundantly (with bread, 6:34-44); secondly, as the one who is with them in the most serious conflicts of their lives (on the raging sea, 6:45-52).

Commentary

³⁰ *The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.* ³¹ *He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat.* ³² *So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.*

The Return. At the conclusion of their mission to the Galilean villages the disciples returned to Jesus. He had commissioned them to be his emissaries (Ch. 6:7-13), and it is appropriate to this circumstance that they should report to him how they had fulfilled their commission. While the word "apostles" is accurately translated in v.30, there is a tendency in the modern reading to associate this with "the Twelve" and to associate the term with an official title. What might get lost is the whole purpose of what they were sent to go. Simply put they were missionaries.

David Lose notes: "There is something both beautiful and poignant about Jesus' response to the disciples' activity. When they come back to tell about all they'd done, he doesn't greet them with praise or encouragement. That might seem odd to us who live in the 'age of affirmation.' Nor does he correct them or do an assessment of their work, as one might expect from a teacher. Rather, he looks deeper and sees their need. They are weary, tired, worn out by the constant coming and going of the crowds that follow them. And so rather than praise or affirm, encourage or critique, Jesus invites them to come away, to find a moment of solitude, and to rest. There will be time for praise and instruction later. What is most needful now is rest.

Rest. Jesus invited them to a deserted/wilderness place to *anapausasthe* (rest, remain quiet, cease). It is noteworthy that Mark twice notes that the place of rest is in the wilderness, apart from the crowds of people. The word *eremos* most literally refers to an uninhabited place in contrast to *polis* = "a populated place," "city," "town." While sparseness of people and vegetation often go together in the Middle East, e.g., a desert region; this word centers more on the lack of population than the lack of vegetation. Note that in v.39 the crowd sits down on the green grass.

Jesus was conscious of the efforts that the apostle's mission entailed and knew that it was important to recover their strength. In fact, as the event following the Sabbath in Capernaum shows (Mk 1:35), Jesus also sometimes went to a deserted place to rest and to recover His strength through His deep prayer to God the Father.

As we know from our own experience, it is impossible to experience deep refreshment if we exclude God from our rest and recreation. Although the term *anapausasthe* does not necessarily imply prayer or contemplation, Jesus' own experience (especially in Luke) points to "withdrawal" and "rest" as exactly those times when Jesus is renewed by prayer and contemplation – renewed for the missionary endeavor.

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel, #264), summons us to live a contemplative spirit: "The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty

will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others.” Pope Francis nicely connects the rest/contemplation as the needed component to the missionary life in which we pass on what we have received to other.

Another Exodus. *People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat.*³² *So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.*

It seems as though Jesus and the apostles have attracted a large crowd of people. The short lake voyage, back to the old familiar surroundings of the sea, after tramping the dusty roads, must in itself have been a rest and relaxation for the Galilean fishermen. But the small size of the Sea of Galilee made it quite possible for the crowds, travelling along the shore, to outdistance the little ship, which probably had no favorable wind.

The text is not specific enough to know if the ones *coming and going in great number* were people that had been following Jesus already, were folks drawn in by the missionary endeavors, or were folks who simply lived in the locale. In any case, whatever Jesus’ plan for he and the apostles to have time apart and alone in order to rest and renew, the people have other ideas, hungering within for something more – even if they could not name the hunger. Perhaps they too needed rest. *People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.* Maybe this is why “*they hastened.*”

That God provides rest for his people within the wilderness is a recurring theme in the Scripture. It was the literal rest of the wilderness generation led by Moses and Joshua which became the type of the final rest promised to the people of God in a second exodus in the preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The ancient hope of rest within the wilderness is to be fulfilled as Jesus gathers his disciples to a wilderness-place that they may be by themselves. The disciples and the multitudes that pursue them prove to be the people of the new exodus. The presence of Jesus and the provision of God will give to this time of withdrawal the character of rest within the wilderness.

Many scholars note that Greek syntax is unclear (see note), but Lane is not convinced there is a lack of clarity, and he offers: ...withdrawal of the multitude from the several Galilean villages to the wilderness where they experienced Jesus’ compassion was the direct result of the mission activity of the Twelve. By accenting the relationship of the multitude to the disciples (“they saw *them*, and they recognized *them* and they ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of *them*”) Mark shows that the provision of rest in the wilderness was the ultimate intention behind the disciples’ commission by Jesus.” It is notable that the same word for “rest” (*anapausasthe*) is also used of our eternal reward – truly, the ultimate intention of God.

I would also offer that this time of rest point ahead to the remainder of the Markan passage (vv.35-40) in which the miraculous feeding of the multitude foreshadows the rest associated with the Last Supper, a rest celebrated in our own Eucharist.

But it is also interesting to note that the people did not “follow” Jesus to the deserted place; they went ahead on their own. This Greek word, *epiginosko*, usually means “thorough knowledge about.” That is, the prefix *epi-* implies a more detailed knowledge than *ginosko* by itself. People had “*come to know,*” but know (or recognize) what? What do they expect from Jesus? What do they “recognize” or think they “know” about him that leads them to go to where he is going? What motivates people to drop everything and seek Jesus today?

A Heart Moved. ³⁴ *When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

It is easy to imagine the groan of despair that must have gone up from the exhausted disciples, when they saw, long before they had reached the other shore, that the inevitable curious crowd had followed and the possibility of rest was fading. It is probable that this natural weariness accounts for the note of irritation in their question to Jesus in v.37, as well as their obvious hint in v.36 that the crowds had had more than enough teaching already: ³⁶ *Dismiss them so that they can go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat.* ³⁷ *He said to them in reply, "Give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Are we to buy two hundred days' wages worth of food and give it to them to eat?"*

Note that he did the preaching to the crowds himself; he did not call upon his disciples to join in the task now. Compare his anxiety to secure proper rest for them after their wearisome preaching tour, careless though he might be for himself.

But Jesus, just as weary as the disciples and seeing the same crowds as they, *had compassion on them* (34). The comparison of the people to "*sheep without a shepherd*" is an allusion to Num. 27:17 and Ezek. 34:5. It is notable that in Ezekiel, the motivation of God to promise the people a "good shepherd" is that God was moved with pity/compassion. Also noteworthy is that both Numbers and Ezekiel take place in the wilderness. In Num. 27:17 Moses prays that the Lord will appoint a leader to take his place prior to his death in the wilderness lest the people "*be as sheep which have no shepherd.*" It is significant that God appointed as shepherd Joshua, whose name in the Septuagint is "Jesus." In Ezek. 34 the shepherd image is also associated with the wilderness. There is no shepherd for the sheep, but God promises the coming of a faithful shepherd, "*my servant David*" (Ch. 34:23), who will establish a covenant of peace, causing the people to " *dwell securely in the wilderness*" (Ch. 34:25). In 6:34 Mark proclaims Jesus on the background provided by these passages: he is the one appointed by God to be the leader of the people in their exodus into the wilderness; he is God's servant David who provides rest for the people in the wilderness. These theological notes are not extraneous to Mark's telling of the story. They provide the indispensable background for understanding the feeding narrative that follows. The multitude that pursues Jesus and the disciples are representative of Israel once more in the wilderness. There they experience the compassion of the Messiah, who teaches them "at length" concerning the Kingdom of God.

They experience all this when they rest.

Reflections

As ever Pheme Perkins [601-2] offers food for thought.

This passage begins with Jesus expressing compassion for the crowd. Teaching and feeding show that Jesus is the shepherd. The combination represents a variant of the teaching and healing that have been characteristic of all of Jesus' ministry. People today find it difficult to balance those two aspects of Christian responsibility. Some think that the social ministries of the church are all that is necessary to make Christ present in the world. Others think that the church should have nothing to do with feeding and healing except when it is necessary to help someone in the local community. The church's ministry, so the argument goes, is to preach the gospel and provide for public worship.

Both sides are wrong. There is no Christianity without proclaiming the gospel. Teaching and learning the Word of God are as essential to faith as are prayer and belonging to a Christian community. A community that has the same compassion for the suffering that Jesus exhibited cannot be content with only preaching the gospel to the already converted. Christians must also attempt to meet the pressing social and material needs of others, even if few of those who receive such services ever become members of the church.

Notes

Mark 6:30 *Apostles*: here, and in some manuscripts at Mk 3:14, Mark calls apostles (i.e., those sent forth) the Twelve whom Jesus sends as his emissaries, empowering them to preach, to expel demons, and to cure the sick (Mk 6:13). Only after Pentecost is the title used in the technical sense. Perkins would argue a Jewish precedent: the term apostle indicates that they are official agents (שליח *šāliah*). Returning to report to the one who sent them is a function of official emissaries. It shows readers that apostolic teaching is based on the teaching of Jesus.

Mark 6:31 *deserted place*: The term *erēmos topos* appeared in Mark 1, describing both where Jesus spent forty days in the desert before his ministry began (*erēmos*, 1:12–13) and the place to which he withdrew to pray after his first healing miracles (1:35). *eremos* most literally refers to an uninhabited place in contrast to *polis* = “a populated place,” “city,” “town.” While sparseness of people and vegetation often go together in the Middle East, e.g., a desert region; this word centers more on the lack of population than the lack of vegetation. Note that in v.39 the crowd sits down on the green grass. **rest:** *anapausasthe* – to rest, remain quiet, and can also mean to cease, to stop. (EDNT 1.87] In NT usage it refers to both physical and mental rest.

Mark 6:33 *People...many...they*: The Greek sentence is awkwardly overloaded. The term “many” is located after the two verbs “saw” and “came to know”, but prior to the conjunction and. The sentence could refer to an indefinite “they” who saw Jesus and the disciples leave, a smaller group who recognized those in the boat, and that group plus others who ran to the spot where the boat is going.

Mark 6:34 *pity*: The withdrawal of Jesus with his disciples to a desert place to rest attracts a great number of people to follow them. Toward this people of the new exodus Jesus is moved with pity (*esplanchniste*); he satisfies their spiritual hunger by teaching them many things, thus gradually showing himself the faithful shepherd of a new Israel. Jesus was often moved to act out of his compassion (1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Luke 7:13). **like sheep without a shepherd:** The comparison evokes a well-established metaphor. Moses prays that the people will have a leader so that they will not find themselves “like sheep without a shepherd” (Num 27:17). The prophets condemned kings for failing to act as shepherds (1 Kgs 22:17). Ezekiel promises a new age in which God will shepherd the people (Ezek 34:5–6). Jesus responds to the plight of the people by teaching the crowd “many things” (v. 34). Thus he presents himself as their shepherd. Some interpreters include the “green grass” on which the crowd is told to recline (v. 39) in the shepherd image, claiming Jesus’ actions reenact Ps 23:2

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