

Seeing Jesus in Scripture

These passages from the Gospel of Mark illustrate the political implications behind Jesus' actions, and the ways in which he continually challenged the status quo

1:16-20

- Jesus has just announced the coming of God's kingdom (verse 15), but then calls common labourers to help him in the task. It is not what we might expect, and a sign that Jesus intends to subvert our expectations!
- Jesus chooses his disciples, a reversal of the normal practice, and the fact that they are ordinary, working people suggests that this new kingdom will be about overturning the structures of power and privilege.
- Jesus demands they leave their workplace. This means both leaving behind economic security and breaking up the social fabric of the extended family. A new society is being formed! Life will not go on as before!

1:21-28

- This exorcism takes place on the Sabbath in the synagogue – the time and place around which society was carefully ordered and regulated. So this is a way of Jesus challenging the existing order of things.
- The exorcism is 'framed' by reference to the crowd (verses 22 and 27) which emphasises that this is a very public contest about authority between Jesus and the establishment.
- What is the demon in the story? The demon is both defiant and fearful. It holds people captive. Jesus is invading the territory of the scribes, where the scribes rule and exercise their authority to teach the law and control the way people live, and it is this 'spirit' Jesus is challenging. Jesus wants to free people held captive to the old authority structures that so often oppressed and marginalised people.

1:29-39

- The healing of Simon's mother-in-law takes place in private, after sunset when the Sabbath is over, suggesting that it could easily be a controversial act (see 3:1-6)!
- This is the first time a woman appears in Mark's gospel. She 'serves' Jesus (verse 31) – a word that is not about making dinner, but about being a follower and a disciple. Thus, we discover that in God's kingdom women will not be devalued but will be identified as true disciples.
- Economic and political circumstances in Palestine had left many in the population poor and dispossessed. Illness and disability were part of this cycle of poverty. So Jesus care for many in such need challenges the acceptance of these circumstances.

1:40-45

- The leper was the archetypal outcast who was regarded as impure. Only the priest could preside over cleansing. Jesus breaks the purity code by touching the leper, showing that he will not cooperate with laws that marginalise people.
- The leper is sent to the priest, not out of obedience but to protest! The priest would not accept Jesus' authority, but he is given no choice!

2:1-12

- Jesus' teaching is in opposition to that of the scribes who see themselves in control of how people must live and behave. They decide how sin is defined and who is guilty, but Jesus will not go along with their exercise of power.
- The physically disabled were held to be inferior. Jesus not only restores the paralysed man to health, but in doing so challenges the system that declares him sinful.
- Jesus unilaterally bypasses public authority in order to bring justice and liberation to human life.

2:13-22

- Tax collectors were despised by upright Jews, not least because they collaborated with Gentiles. Jesus transcends such social barriers.
- A meal takes place involving Jesus, sinners and tax collectors. This is an extraordinary coming together of different groups of people! Again, all kinds of social barriers are being overcome and people brought together across divides.

- The shared meal was at the heart of society. So the religious authorities were very anxious to control what went on – who could eat together, what the diet should be, etc. Here Jesus subverts such rules and regulations.
- Jesus has no time for the fasting of the Pharisees, seeing this as the kind of piety that hides real issues. The fact is that they could afford to fast because they had plenty to eat the rest of the time; by contrast many Jesus mixed with constantly went hungry.

2:23-28

- The controversies over food continue, and here the question is when and where to eat. The Pharisees set the rules over the sowing, harvesting and marketing of produce, and this included Sabbath rules. But for many poor farmers, these rules were an impossible burden. They could not afford to pay tithes or leave fields fallow. Jesus takes their side by deliberately flouting the rules, engaging in an act of civil disobedience.
- Jesus endorses the Jubilee principle that hungry people have a right to food despite laws that restrict such access. He sees food as a political issue and a faith issue. God is Lord over the Sabbath!

3:1-6

- Familiar religious and political arguments are at the centre of this healing miracle – Jesus is deliberately defying and breaking the Sabbath laws.
- The synagogue confrontation reads like a trial scene, with the authorities standing poised to condemn Jesus. But he breaks the law to raise deeper moral issues about the health of a society that allows people to stay sick.