

8.16.09 / Mark 4:1-20

Again, this passage follows directly on the last one studied. It contains two sections: public teaching, and an explanation of the public teaching. The theme of secrecy, common in Mark's gospel (as we have already encountered, with the demons being silenced, and will encounter again later) appears here as well. In this case it is Jesus' teaching that appears to be secret, said in a parable, in a way that will not immediately register with the hearers without listener involvement of some sort.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

The opening of this passage tells us that this is an important passage. First, Mark tells us that this is a huge crowd, and that Jesus has obtained a boat to teach from. This signals a major speech. What's more, Mark tells us that Jesus was teaching "many things", but records only one of them. Rather than speculating on what else might have been said we should note that Mark, under the guidance of the Spirit, surely made the correct choice, and included the most important section. This parable, then, and its explanation, are important.

We should also note an abundance of harvest metaphors in the Bible. This parable might make more immediate sense to someone in first-century Galilee simply because there already existed a body of discussion that used crops as metaphors for the faithful.

The section of Isaiah that Jesus quotes in the second part of this week's passage comes from Isaiah 6, specifically verses 9 and 10. In the first part of this passage the Lord appears to Isaiah in terrible majesty, Isaiah proclaims that he will surely die from such a sight, and, instead, is given a strange prophetic call: to tell the people that they will perceive, in a number of ways, without understanding until the land is utterly destroyed and the people are exiled. The passage ends by suggesting that "the holy seed is in the stump" – that the restoration of Israel, shattered by the Babylonian Exile (almost certainly the historical event to which Isaiah refers), will come out of this destruction.

It is sometimes common, when reading New Testament quotations of Old Testament passages, to assume that the New Testament author or speaker meant only to use a particular set of words from the Old Testament in a completely new context, as if being able to lift a particular phrase from Scripture made it more true than if the inspired speaker had said it *de novo*. This makes little sense. Quotations from the Old Testament, especially to Jewish audiences who know the Old Testament, are meant to demonstrate that the events referred to in the Old Testament are happening, or have happened, or are a metaphor for what is happening now. When Jesus quotes Isaiah he is not just saying, "Oh, hey, Isaiah said this thing about people not listening, I'll quote that to say people won't listen to me, either." Instead, he is either suggesting that Isaiah's prophecy is still ongoing (that the period of not listening has not ended, and that destruction and restoration are yet to come) or that his ministry and Isaiah's are of a similar type, probably in a large way. (That is to say, Jesus may be saying, "This is how you always treat prophets who bring you God's words," or perhaps, "No one ever listens when a prophet says a hard thing – but they wish they had, later.")

Handling this chunk of Isaiah will be a bit difficult. Mark has no problems expecting you to know the entire book of Isaiah (most good Jews in his day could probably recite large portions of it), to have a sense of where this comment falls within the sweep of the book, and to understand how this has or has not yet played out in history. A Community Group full of seekers will not be in the same position, and so this particular aspect of the passage may need to be taught, rather than discussed, in some groups.

- 1) This whole section is about parables. This may be review for some people, but what is a parable?
- 2) Why do the Twelve, and only the Twelve, receive the explanation? Why are they “given the secret of the Kingdom of God”? What is the secret of the Kingdom of God?
- 3) Why this quotation from Isaiah? Go and read the whole section – Isaiah 6:8-end at least. Does it make sense to quote this pre-Exilic prophecy as a reason to conceal the meaning of teaching centuries later?
- 4) What is the expectation of understanding hear? Does Jesus expect any of his audience to understand the parable (now, or later)? Does he expect the Twelve to? This ties into the third question: if the parables will always be concealed, why teach at all? Is the parable actually easy to understand without any explanation?
- 5) The seed in the parable becomes the word in the explanation. What is the word? Not the Bible – “the word of God” for the Bible post-dates this statement by centuries. But what word? What does the word do?
- 6) Is there any particular significance to the 30, 60, and 100 fold, or is this just a way to emphasize “a lot”?

A few answers

In the interest of helping you think through the passage a little more, we’re providing some answers to some of the questions above. Bear in mind that what you are about to read comes out of a very limited set of minds that constantly find new things they overlooked in passages they have read through before. This is not exhaustive, but it will trace the lines of thought that generated the questions above. Please, though, be willing to disagree with these interpretations, and answer both these questions, and others, in different ways if that is where the Bible leads you.

In the last three chapters Jesus has done a couple of important things: he’s been baptized and defeated Satan in the temptation, thereby inaugurating his ministry. He’s begun preaching, successfully faced opposition, and engaged in a large-scale redefinition of Jewish Law around purpose, and not custom. Jesus, it seems, wants us to see the Law as something that God is doing for some purpose, to make a particular sort of society or person, and not as a matter of ritual. And he seems to think that most people have missed this. We’ve now come to the end of that section, for at least a little while. Jesus has had some definitive face-offs, and the battle lines are drawn. For now the focus seems to be preaching to the undecided, and not additional confrontation.

The parables exist to put up a small roadblock to understanding. None of them are impossible to crack, and Jesus seems a bit exasperated with the Twelve that they have not already figured this one out. (“Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”) They do, however, slow the hearer down a bit. They have to be willing to work out what Jesus is saying, and there will be few immediate reactions, good or bad, to a parable.

Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah is a difficult one. However, the track of the second half of Isaiah 6 (not listening, destruction, redemption) parallels Jesus’ own life so closely that it seems likely that this is what he is suggesting. That, like Isaiah, he will not be listened to, that Israel will reject and destroy him (and themselves, in a different sense), and yet redemption will come out of this destruction. In the immediate context it probably reminds the Twelve that many prophets (Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea, to name a few) prophesied in difficult ways that required the faithful to pay attention, and that Jesus is fully within the prophetic tradition (remember, Jesus is a prophet – much else, besides, but fully a prophet) and that they should pay heed to what he says.

But the Twelve are also the reconstituted Israel, the twelve men for twelve tribes, called into apostleship from a mountain, in a Sinai-like reference (the secret of the Kingdom of God is probably this, that they’ve been

included and they are on the inside). They should be fully on board with the program. If they are a bit slow they are also faithful, and so Jesus, having picked them to be the core of his new/real Israel is willing to help them catch up.

A major concern here may simply be that a lot of people are coming to Jesus for the wrong reasons. They don't know what he's up to, and if he doesn't work them around from a shallow "healing for me, beat-downs for the Romans" sort of idea of a Messiah slowly they won't come at all. Twelve men he can handle, and instruct, and guide. Doing the same for half the region is harder, and at this point the parables help filter the thrill-seekers from the devout.

The word, then, is the call to follow Jesus to a whole new vision of Israel, the Messiah, and God's relationship with humanity. Jesus is offering something much better, but much harder, than what people are asking for. They want a new government and perhaps a few miracles; he's offering them new hearts. This lies at the base of the passage, and all the application that stems from it.

The final question, about 30, 60, and 100 is asked primarily because every once and a while someone does get a very strange idea in their heads about this. This has gone on for at least 1,700 years, from the first time various ideas about levels of celibacy were linked to this passage by unmarried Fathers of the Church. Since we're giving answer here the answer to this question is most likely no. This is just a way to say "a lot". If someone thinks they've got a key that cracks some 30, 60, and 100 code and finds something else in it look closely. It could be a key to nowhere. While this could be wrong, history suggests that bad interpretation has come out of this passage before.

What does it mean in our current context?

A short header for this section: most of the questions here are worked out from the basic four-step Biblical study process outlined several months ago at Sync Night. (And which will be taught as a 5-week Journey class, open to all, this September 2009, in case you wish to review this process or there are people in your group who would benefit from the class) In that process application is drawn from general themes of the passage, which are then re-specified for us. Here, for instance, a general theme is that Jesus is putting up rather strange barriers to understanding what he says. Other themes in this passage focus on how people express interest in Jesus and then stop paying attention.

As always, most of these questions are actually several stacked questions, in order.

1) How do we deal with God's obstructionism here? Maybe we think it would be much nicer if God laid everything out very clearly, but that's clearly not what's happening. How do we feel about this? How do we see clearly, if God is not making things easy for us? Is it a matter of intelligence and study? Is it a matter of having one's emotions set right? Is it a matter of the spirit? Is it all of them? Think of a time when you have suddenly understood a passage of Scripture in a new way, and found life in that. How did that come about? How could that be encouraged to happen more often in your study?

2) If God, Who knows best, does not always make blatantly obvious statements, how do we evaluate the need to be clear about God to others? Vintage21 Church, by nature of its outward mission, must constantly balance the need for "higher level" teaching with the need to be understandable to seekers and doubters. Think about this for a bit. How should that balance come through in your own life? Is there ever a point at which you could, or should, say to someone, "I could explain that to you, but you'd need to read the entire Gospel of Matthew, half of Exodus, and Romans to understand the sweep of God's action. For now, know that God wants you to do . . ."? Is there a risk to making the Bible too high-level? Is there a risk to dumbing it down? Which are you more prone to? Finally, a good point to re-center the conversation, what does God REALLY need you to know, and how hard or simple is that?

3) Jesus speaks of the word being “sown” by him. What is this word calling us to, now, in 21st century America? Odds are it’s not to give up our hidden cache of swords for stabbing Romans, but maybe we are really on the lookout for a cut-rate miracle. This calling seems to be a hard thing, in which many fail. What are we being called out of? What are we being called into? For the disciples Jesus changed their whole lives – their careers, their faith, their relationships. Does God’s call fall on us so radically now? Is the call easy? The Jews of Jesus’ day had attached other objects of devotion to their idea of a Messiah, including ideas of rabid nationalism. Have we tried to merge Jesus with false gods of our culture? Consumerism? A sense of entitlement? Our own politics or nationalism? (Our culture is not short on false gods – the three just listed could help get people thinking.)

4) Jesus mentions three groups of things that choke out the seed: Satan, persecution, and the cares and desires of the world. How active are these in what we see? Which one threatens the people we know most? How might we, as a church, a Community Group, and as individuals, counteract these forces? Jesus mentions these are forces that kill off the seed. Do these forces also weaken our grip on God’s mission? How? Have you experienced one or more of these? How did you get back on track? How could your Community Group help everyone to stay on track against these forces?

Weekly Questions to Ask the Group

What do you notice most about God when you read this passage?

What does this passage reveal about the status of your heart – is it soft, good soil, or is it rocky, thorny, or on the path?