

11.15.09 / Mark 6:1-13

This appears to be a bridge section between two larger sections of Mark. The first story underlines the importance of faith, by discussing how Jesus is unable to do miracles at Nazareth right after a section in which we describe Jesus' incredible power. The second section, the sending out of the Twelve, begins a new phase of Jesus' ministry, where he grants authority to the apostles to do some of his work, which begins the thread of the narrative that will occupy the end of chapter six.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

The first part of the first story bears little comment. Jesus goes to his hometown, preaches in the synagogue as he has in many other places, and faces ridicule. While there are two variants on the text, one reading "the carpenter, the son of..." and one reading, "the son of the carpenter", the idea is the same in both. Jesus is either a manual laborer (and there are reasons for preferring the reading that calls Jesus the carpenter, the son of Mary) or the son of one. They are questioning his credentials. Talking about him as his mother's son, not his father's, may also be somewhat impolite, since this is usually done in contexts where one's mother is a questionable person, or accused of having had children by a man not her husband. Now, this may not be the case here, since Joseph has disappeared from the story at this point, probably through death. The mentioning of his siblings is simple enough, indicating familiarity. Indeed, given the culture of the time his sisters being "here with us" may mean his own brothers-in-law are asking some of these questions!

It is a small irony that one of Jesus' brothers is named Judas, a name popularized by the Maccabean leader who set incorrect Messianic expectations for many Jews.

Jesus complains that the familiarity these people have with him seems to have prevented them from recognizing who he is, and then, in what is probably the most problematic section for us, cannot do miracles. There is a problem with this statement: How is it that Jesus, who is God, "could do no mighty work there"? As God, Jesus knew that this was not the right time or place to do miracles for a large group (Mark 8:11-12 provides another example where Jesus refuses to give signs to a group of people who profess unbelief), but he chose to grant healing to specific individuals who believed in him.

The major theme of this story is clear. Jesus can calm storms. He can banish legions of demons. He can raise the dead. But the miracles of the Kingdom of God, the restoration, the blessings, are not coming to the faithless. This is underscored somewhat in the following story.

The sending out story has a few important points. First, it is a sending out story. Jesus is essentially deputizing the apostles and letting them work somewhat on their own (they are in pairs). However, he himself is not looking over their shoulders. This indicates something about the apostles' progress in figuring out what Jesus is doing, and also marks an important point in Jesus' ministry. In fact, it is a prefiguring of the church, where Jesus leaves entirely as a physical person and sends out all his followers to do his work. Critical to this is the giving of authority. Jesus does not ask the disciples (or the church) to do his work without his tools. Instead, he gives the disciples authority over demons so that they can do his work.

Secondly, the disciples are to travel light and depend on the places they come to for provisions. The list of things they shouldn't take is a list of good traveling supplies. Money to buy food, food, no bag to carry supplies. They shouldn't even bring a second chiton, a long garment that served as the primary clothing worn next to the skin. (A man wearing a chiton and a cloak against the weather would be properly clothed, if I understand this rightly.) And they should wear sandals, which are not the best traveling shoes. Why this dependence? Because they will stay in one person's house (some religious leaders moved about begging in a village) accepting the hospitality of that person. Their need will emphasize the next part.

Judgment. Because the apostles require hospitality to stay any length of time it is very possible to turn them away. And if that happens they are to shake the dust off their feet, indicating that even the ground the village stands on is cursed or unclean. Again, the Kingdom of God is coming, but not to those who refuse it.

The final lines of the story indicate that the apostles are successful in their mission. They preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal people.

As far as questions go, it is probably best to treat the first story as a chance to summarize the entire power miracles section (calming the storm through last week), and then to ask how it is that God's blessings come to us. This seems to lead directly to application – are we Jairus or the people of Nazareth? How do we or don't we invite God's powerful work into our lives?

The second section has a definite church-before-the-church feel. How does the sending out of apostles work? How are they doing Jesus work? How are they able to? What does it look like? How might we be engaged in the same task?

Additional Questions to Ask the Group

Who is God showing Himself to be in this passage?
How is your life in conflict with the truth in this passage?