
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 8:27–38

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The lectionary hides the importance of Mark 8:27–38 by tucking it away on the Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost. Its occurrence in the lectionary—just another Sunday in Ordinary Time—does not prompt preachers to see that this passage is a fulcrum in the Gospel of Mark, or that it is an important contributor to the historic and contemporary discussion of the significance of the cross. There are several important opportunities for preaching here.

The first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark announce the main theme of the book: The Realm of God is at hand (Mark 1:14–15). In Jewish apocalyptic theology, including the Gospel of Mark, history is divided into two eras, the present old age and the coming new age (the Realm).

The old world is marked by the vicious influence of Satan and the demons and is characterized by idolatry, injustice, exploitation, slavery, scarcity, enmity between humankind and nature, and death. Recent scholarship rightly calls attention to the Roman Empire as a systemic embodiment of the old creation with its idolatry, exploitation, and rule by violence. By contrast, in the Realm of God, the new creation, God's purposes for blessing rule in every heart, every household, every relationship. In this new world, the angels (and Jesus) assist God in creating a realm characterized by true worship, justice, mutual support, freedom, abundance, blessing between humankind and nature, and, of course, living forever in a body that does not decay.

This Gospel, in company with other apocalyptic documents of the period, thus uses its theological worldview to put forward trenchant social and political criticism of Rome. While such interpretations can illuminate many aspects of this Gospel, they can also become reductionistic, as if the Gospel of Mark focuses *only* on anti-Caesarism. From the apocalyptic point of view, empires are part-and-parcel of the broader old age. This perspective turns on the microphone for the preacher to criticize personal, social, economic, political, and ecological developments in today's world from the standpoint of the degree to which they are consistent or inconsistent with the values and practices of the Realm. How can the church become part of the movement toward a renewed world with the characteristics of the Realm?

Mark's picture of the coming apocalypse differs from many

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traditional Jewish apocalyptic anticipations in two ways. (1) For Mark, Jesus is God's agent—God's apocalyptic prophet—in announcing the transformation. (2) For Mark, as for Jesus' followers generally, the manifestation of the Realm begins in a partial way through the ministry of Jesus but will come to completion only in connection with the second coming of God's apocalyptic prophet. In this way of thinking, the apocalyptic prophet not only points to the coming Realm but is an active agent in helping it materialize. Biblical interpreters and theologians sometimes refer to time dynamics of this way of thinking as "already and not yet," "the present and future," or "partially realized and fully realized."

In Mark 1:14–8:20, Jesus not only announces the presence of the Realm, but also calls people to repent from their collusion with the rulers, systems, values and practices of the old world, and to become a part of the community moving toward the Realm. Jesus demonstrates the presence and power of the Realm through exorcisms, healings, nature miracles, and a raising from the dead. In the first half of the Gospel, Mark presents the coming of the Realm in largely inviting terms. Preachers sometimes imprecisely speak of Mark presenting a "theology of glory" in this first part of the Gospel because of the emphasis on the positive nature of the Realm.

At the same time, Mark describes the twelve disciples in Jesus' inner circle as caught up in the theology of glory. They misunderstand Jesus and the Realm, and they often fail to do what Jesus asks them to do to represent the Realm.

Along the way, Mark ascribes negative reactions to Jesus and the Realm on the part of some Jewish leaders. Most scholars today

regard this Jewish antagonism to Jesus as Mark's retrojection of the conflict between Jewish leaders and the Markan community from Mark's time—about 70 CE—into the narrative of Jesus in order to justify a growing separation between Mark's community and other Jewish communities in the wake of the fall of the temple.

Mark 8:22–26 sets the specific literary stage for the reading for today. This story is more than a narrative of the healing of a person who could not see. Mark, like many other Jewish writers, uses the language of sight as a way of speaking about perception and interpretation.

The disciples—and the listener of the Gospel of Mark—are like the person at Bethsaida. Prior to receiving the announcement of the Realm, they did not perceive the Realm as a possibility. From 1:14 through 8:21, they have embraced the initial announcement that the Realm is at hand (Mark 1:14–15), but have understood that announcement only in a partial way. They are like the person at Bethsaida in the first stage of healing. They see something—similar to the way the person who had been without sight could see people as if they were trees moving. The disciples understand some things about the Realm, but they need to see clearly, that is, they need to understand the Realm more fully. Jesus' act of fully restoring the sight of the person who could not see clearly signifies what needs to happen for the disciples—and for the listener—in the rest of the Gospel. Mark will give them the fuller picture of the coming of the Realm and how they must be ready to respond.

Up to this point in the Gospel, the vision of the disciples includes nothing more than the theology of glory. In the lection for today, Mark reveals that the pathway to the Realm involves suffering for both Jesus and the disciples. This perspective is the famous "second touch" of Mark 8:22–26.

The setting of today's text is on the road to Caesarea Philippi, located about thirty miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The name of the area makes it evident that the Caesarea Philippi is a tribute to Caesar, a reminder of the omnipresence of the Empire. Prior to being called Caesarea Philippi, the area was known as Panios, from the name Pan, a Greek deity. The narrative thus provokes the listener to compare and contrast two ways of conceiving the world—the Roman Empire (in the context of the broken old age) and the Realm of God (God's possibilities for renewed community now and in the future).

In this symbolically loaded environment, Mark injects the question of Jesus' identity into the narrative (Mark 8:27–30). Christian preachers sometimes speak of Judaism having a single messianic expectation. For example, I continue to hear statements like this on religious radio: "The Jews expected a second David, a Jewish nationalist, who would conquer the world through military means." The preacher usually goes on to hype the superiority of the messiahship of Jesus who "was not what they expected."

However, the first century CE was a season of pluralism in Jewish messianic interest. Many different Jewish groups promoted their own candidates for a messianic figure along with their own understandings of Messiah, many of which were neither militaristic nor nationalist. Some groups did not expect a messiah.

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Judaism is still pluralistic on this issue. Many Jewish people do not anticipate a messiah. Jewish groups that do expect a messiah are diverse in their expectations. In view of such pluralism, Christian preachers should never speak in caricature of *the* Jewish expectation of a messiah and his purposes.

From this perspective, Mark 8:27–38 is Mark's entry into the wider Jewish discussion of whether there would be a messiah, and if so, what kind. In a fascinating development, Mark 13:6 and 13:21–23 suggest that a similar controversy was taking place within the world of Jesus' followers, and perhaps even within the congregation to which Mark wrote, around how to interpret Jesus. This is not a surprise to the contemporary preacher who looks at the Bible through the lens of historical, literary, and theological criticism, and who already knows that the Gospels and Letters contain interpretations of Jesus with different nuances—e.g., Paul emphasizing certain things, Mark with distinctive nuances, and Matthew with characteristic perspectives. In view of the pluralism of the Christologies of antiquity, a preacher should never speak of *the* way of understanding Jesus in the Bible.

The preacher might help the congregation reflect on christological diversity within the church today. Thinking again of religious radio, one can scan from channel to channel and hear a different interpretation of Jesus on every channel. At one end of the interpretive spectrum is Jesus the wisdom teacher, whose wisdom is usually the social progressivism of today. At the other end is Jesus of Premillennialism, whose primary work is final judgment, with rapture along the way. One cannot speak of *the* Christian interpretation of Jesus but only of different pictures of Jesus and of the different implications in personal and social life of each picture.

A preacher could take today's reading as a jumping off point for a sermon intended to help the congregation consider its Christology—what the community *really* believes about the purpose(s) of Jesus' ministry, and what they *could* believe. What we believe about the purposes of Jesus has direct implications for how we understand the purposes of the church in its internal life and in its larger community witness.

Traditional Christian theology has been centrally concerned with the question of the nature of Jesus, in particular with the relationship between humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus.

However, we need to leave that issue behind as we hear the Gospel of Mark. The question “Who do people say that I am?” is less a query about the nature of Jesus and more a question of how people perceive Jesus to function in the purposes of God.

The disciples initially respond to the question by reporting answers from the wider crowd following Jesus: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. These answers are part of the wider Jewish discussion of the identity of the messiah. Mark identifies both John the Baptist and Elijah as figures in the final apocalyptic drama (Mark 1:1–8 and 9:9–13). Indeed, according to Mark, John the Baptist is Elijah *redivivus* (Mark 9:9–13). Likely Mark has similar meanings in mind for the otherwise unidentified “prophets.” Although such figures had an honored place in Jewish religious history and in the current revealing of the Realm of God, according to Mark, they do not play the decisive role that Jesus does. They point to, and prepare people for, the Realm of God, but they are not agents in the manifestation of that Realm.

Mark identifies Jesus explicitly as “the Messiah” (“the Christ”). As commentators rightly point out, the word “christ” is not a name but a designation rooted in the practice of anointing significant figures with oil when they were installed in office. The Greek word *chriō* at the root of the word “christ” means “to anoint.” I remember a famous theologian once saying the term christ might woodenly mean “oily head.” Of course, as noted previously, first-century Jewish people debated the specific theological meaning of the notion of the christ. Mark tells the story of Jesus so as to say, “If you want to know the meaning of the notion of the christ, and the identity of the christ, here it is: Jesus—as I interpret his story.”

Contemporary congregants often find enigmatic Jesus’ command to the disciples to be silent (Mark 8:30). While there are numerous exegetical possibilities, the one that makes the most sense to me is the notion of the apocalyptic mystery or secret. From this point of view, God decided long ago when and how to end the present age and replace it with a new one. But God hid this knowledge, and would reveal it only at the right time. Mark adapts this way of thinking. For Mark, although the ministry of Jesus had begun partially to reveal that the time was at hand, the fuller revelation would take place gradually only after the resurrection, with the final signs coming with the destruction of the temple and attendant phenomena in the year 70 (Mark 13:1–23). The command to “tell no one” was a temporary injunction. The disciples, as insiders, had the secret to the coming of the Realm of God, but God was not ready to unveil it fully to those outside (e.g., Mark 4:10–13).

Why would this motif be important to Mark? The community to which Mark wrote was likely small and besieged. The command to reticence would help explain to them why so few people have responded rightly to the news of the inbreaking of the Realm through Jesus. The time has not been fully right. But, the Markan community needs to understand not only that God has lifted the veil of silence but that more must happen on the final journey to the apocalypse. Indeed, the mission of Jesus’ followers includes alerting gentiles to the great transformation (Mark 13:10).

Note that almost every writer in the Gospels and Letters sees the death of Jesus differently (at least slightly). For Mark, this death does not effect a transaction between God and Jesus on behalf of humankind, such as we find in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. From the standpoint of Mark’s apocalyptic theology, the death of Jesus does not have salvific power by itself.

To be honest, I find this notion theologically objectionable. The idea that God would deliberately withhold transformative possibilities from the human community contradicts the notion that God is unconditional love and seeks to do all that God can do to help the world become more loving, just, and peaceful, with abundance for all. Mark simply used one piece of the worldview available to the Gospel writer (the apocalyptic notion of mystery) to interpret the meaning of another part (confusion in the Markan community).

For the first of three times in the Gospel, the Markan Jesus then foretells his suffering, rejection at the hands of Jewish leaders, death, and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:30–32; 10:32–34). This time is the first that Mark mentions the suffering and resurrection of Jesus as part of the movement towards the Realm. It is the “second touch” of Mark 8:22–26. Mark implies that, to be sure, the Realm of God will bring the transformation of the world portended in the first eight and a half chapters of this book, but the death and resurrection of Jesus—and the suffering of the disciples—are part of the movement toward final transformation.

Because of the many interpretations of the death of Jesus that surface in Christian theology, it is important to note that almost every writer in the Gospels and Letters sees the death of Jesus differently (at least slightly). For Mark, this death does not effect a transaction between God and Jesus on behalf of humankind, such as we find in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. From the standpoint of Mark’s apocalyptic theology, the death of Jesus does not have salvific power by itself.

Mark presents the death of Jesus as the collusion of two old-age power structures: some Jewish leaders who operate under the aegis of the rulers, values, and practices of the old age, and the Roman Empire, which is the epitome of the broken old world. The Realm of God as announced by Jesus is the ultimate threat to the powers of the old creation, because the great change, the

apocalypse, will replace their domains with the values, behaviors, and ecological realities of the Realm. In order to end this threat, the rulers of the old world do the worst thing they can do—their ultimate exercise of power—by putting Jesus to death. And, indeed, when the sun sets on Good Friday and Jesus' body is in the tomb, they appear to have won.

However, the resurrection—the most astonishing event in this Gospel—demonstrates that the power of God is greater than anything in the old order. In the apocalyptic mind-set, resurrection is not an end in itself (as in so many Easter sermons); rather, it is the definitive demonstration that the promises of the Realm of God are trustworthy. God is stronger than the strongest powers of the old age. To adapt an image from a psalm, while suffering may tarry for the night, in the morning God will ultimately exercise the power that transcends all other powers and move toward the final and full manifestation of the Realm (Psalm 30:5).

Although Mark 8:31 comes from Jesus as a prediction of the future, many scholars believe that the saying is a “prophecy after the fact.” That is, Mark put the words into the mouth of Jesus long after his death and resurrection as a way to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death to the congregation in 70 CE and, according to Mark 8:34–37, to relate the significance of that death to their own situations of suffering. Members of the community likely were asking, “If we are continuing to suffer so long after the time of Jesus himself, what did the death of Jesus mean? Why should we continue to be faithful?”

Moreover, Mark adds authority to these specific words of Jesus—and to the figure of Jesus in the Gospel as a whole—by having the events of the prediction unfold in the Gospel just as Jesus said. The congregation can trust the whole of Jesus' teaching in Mark as their guide through the tribulation and apocalypse. In the confusion and opposition during the social chaos after the fall of the temple, they might otherwise be tempted to give up.

The fact that Mark repeats the prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection three times indicates how important it is for those who receive this Gospel to take this teaching to heart.

Jesus said these things quite plainly to the disciples in the inner circle (Mark 8:32). They should have understood immediately. But, as so often in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples in Jesus' inner circle misunderstand. They do not “get” the message. Indeed, in a stunning misperception, Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter represents the “glory crowd” who want the Realm to come without the struggle of suffering.

However, Jesus immediately rebukes Peter for rebuking Jesus' statement that the apocalyptic redeemer must suffer. In the Gospel of Mark, the word “rebuke” (*epitimao*) often has the technical associations of “to exorcise a demon.” The appearance of this verb here suggests that Peter's misinterpretation of Jesus was demonic. Indeed, Peter's remark was inspired by Satan. According to Mark, Peter initially thinks that Jesus is possessed by a demon when Jesus points to the way of suffering as part of the way to the Realm. The Markan Jesus, however, immediately uses the word “rebuke” not only to correct Peter but to indicate that Peter is the one

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possessed by Satan! Jesus exorcises this demon—the glory only theology—from Peter.

In the bigger interpretive picture in the Gospel of Mark, those who think the Realm will come without confrontation and suffering are old world thinkers. They do not understand how deeply entrenched the powers of the old age are, and how violently those powers will resist being replaced by God's renewed world. Yet, their resistance is prelude to their own final, apocalyptic doom. This resistance is all the more mind-numbing when it is clear that by repenting, and becoming a part of the movement toward the Realm, the powers of the old world could have a place in the Realm. Nevertheless, they choose idolatry, injustice, exploitation, slavery, scarcity, enmity between humankind and nature, and death, rather than give up their limited, self-serving domains under their rule.

Preachers sometimes take the admonition of Mark 8:34–37 to take up one's cross and to deny oneself in ways that misuse the text, and that can even do harm to the self. Preachers sometimes apply the reference to bearing one's cross to all forms of suffering. They call disease, divorce, losing a job, and natural disaster our crosses to bear. Moreover, preachers sometimes admonish congregations to “deny themselves” in psychological ways that mean “Repress aspects of who you are.” In lesser terms, I have even heard a preacher say, “To deny yourself means to pass over that second piece of chocolate cake for desert.”

However, from a more mature exegetical perspective, Mark 8:34–37 continues the theme that Jesus' death is not an end in itself, but is paradigmatic of how the powers of the old age will continue to resist the presence and possibility of the Realm and, thereby, to cause the followers of Jesus to suffer. For Mark's part, this saying is a pastoral warning to the congregation to whom Mark wrote. They need to recognize that the resistance to the Realm that put Jesus to death is still a powerful presence in the world. They need to be prepared to endure that resistance. To take up the cross is to agree to suffer voluntarily in behalf of the values and practices of the old age even in the face of those who use force to end those values (and the representatives of those values).

According to Mark 8:38, the stakes are high. When Mark speaks of the apocalyptic redeemer (Jesus, the Son of Man) coming with the angels in the glory of God, Mark has his second coming in mind and, with it, the final judgment. At that time, the final judge, Jesus, will be ashamed of those who were ashamed of him, that is, those who continue to follow the values and practices of the old world instead of the values and practices of the Realm of God. They will not have a place in the Realm of God. According to Mark 9:1, this event would occur within Mark's generation: "Some standing here will not taste death until they see the Realm of God coming with power."

In this context, to deny oneself (Mark 8:34) is to deny the impulse to escape the present conflict between the values and practices of those in the movement to the Realm and those in league with the Empire and the wider forces of the old age by acculturating to the old age. To deny oneself is to face that conflict head on by witnessing to the Realm "for the sake of Jesus and the gospel." In so doing, one can escape the final condemnation. The Markan community is tempted to align itself with the values and practices of the old world. To deny oneself is to remain faithful to the values and practices of the Realm, even when giving up on those things would end the discomfort that comes when the Empire pushes back against the community's witness.

From the perspective of Markan apocalypticism, 8:35 makes a nice play on saving and losing life. On the one hand, those who think they will save themselves by following the values and practices of the old creation will make the unhappy discovery after the apocalypse that they have followed the path to condemnation. They could "gain the whole world" in terms of what the old age values and rewards, but in doing so they forfeit their opportunity to be part of the community of the Realm. On the other hand, those who stand for the attitudes and actions of the Realm, even when suffering for its sake, will make the happy discovery that they are included in the final and complete community of the Realm.

In Mark 8:34–37, the references to "save your life" that have the Realm in view have two time-related parts. First, to be truly saved is to know, in the present, that one is not ultimately a victim of the broken old age. One can live in the confidence that the brokenness does not have the final word, and that one is part of the movement toward the Realm. Second, to be saved will be to have a place in the final and full manifestation of the Realm.

I see Mark 8:34–37 as a case similar to that of Jesus' prediction of his own suffering (8:31, discussed above). As I mentioned earlier, Mark 13:1–23 points to conditions of chaos and suffering already taking place in Mark's community. Mark retrojects 8:34–37 into the mouth of Jesus to offer the congregation a theological interpretation of their suffering, and to encourage them to endure in faithfulness and witness.

As a child I grew up singing a version of "Do Lord" that contains the line, "If you cannot bear the cross, you can't wear the crown."¹

1. <http://www.wlcamp.org/tradition/songs#Do%20Lord>. Accessed April 3, 2017.

I reject the apocalyptic perspective that God has divided history into two ages and that a violent apocalypse will be the means God will use to transition from the old age to the new. I do not anticipate a singular apocalypse of the kind assumed in apocalyptic thinking. I do not think that history can be so neatly divided into two ages.

I close with some thoughts about preaching in conversation with this passage. I have alluded to some of these ideas earlier. As a process theologian, I reject the apocalyptic perspective that God has divided history into two ages and that a violent apocalypse will be the means God will use to transition from the old age to the new. I do not anticipate a singular apocalypse of the kind assumed in apocalyptic thinking. I do not think that history can be so neatly divided into two ages. Rather, change in history typically takes place through an ongoing process; when dramatic changes occur, they tend to come less from outside (divine) interruption and more from developments within the human and natural community. I believe that directly causing people to suffer (as part of the apocalyptic irruption) is inconsistent with a God who is unconditional love.

Nevertheless, I do believe this passage can function in important ways for the preacher. I see God working in history through lures toward the values and practices of the Realm. Although God cannot intervene in history in a single interruptive, apocalyptic event, God is present in every situation to offer as many realm-like qualities as are possible within that situation. In every circumstance, God invites people to the possibilities for worship, justice, mutual support, freedom, abundance, peace and blessing between humankind and nature that are appropriate for the circumstances. Though the Realm will never likely come in fullness, God never gives up offering the possibilities for the Realm.

While I do not think God or Jesus condemns people at an apocalyptic moment of judgment, I am confident that continuing to follow the qualities and behaviors of the old age create conditions that eventually create conditions that lead to social collapse. Every empire has eventually collapsed under the weight of its own self-service, exploitation, and violence. Neither God nor Jesus directly causes these things. Human communities cause them.

Today, as in the time of Mark, the rulers of the old age continue to resist the coming of the Realm, and for the same reasons. The rulers of—and many participants in—today's empires would

rather enjoy the limited and ultimately self-destructive qualities of the broken old creation than repent (and lose their self-serving, exploitative power) and become a part of a new world. This passage contains a significant pastoral word for such circumstances: As a congregation and as individuals, you need to be prepared for such resistance. You may experience discomfort. From my theological viewpoint, God does not intend such things. They are the natural consequences of making a witness. But God is always present in lures toward Realm-like possibilities and in support of our efforts to be faithful to God's aims for realizing the Realm.

I respond best to positive invitations. I wish "Do Lord" would put it more like this: "Those who bear the cross will wear the crown."

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