

EPIPHANY 2009: IN SEARCH OF THE CHURCH
Mark: an alternative community

Mark is the 1st gospel and was written around 66 A.D. At that point in time, Christianity was still a sect within Judaism. Palestine was under Roman occupation and the Jews were struggling with how to cope under their rule. The various groups within Jewish society addressed Roman rule in one of the following ways:

- 1) Upper class elite—high priestly families and the Sadducees: cooperated with the Romans. They chose to compromise their beliefs in order to get along and maintain their power and independence.
- 2) Pharisees: opposed Roman rule and called for reform within Judaism. They wanted to purify their faith, as well as the faithful.
- 3) Essenes: chose to withdraw and isolate themselves into a separate community. They were critical of those who would collaborate with Rome or compromise Jewish beliefs.
- 4) Zealots: wanted to break with Rome through armed rebellion and insurrection

Mark's gospel, however, presents a different way to live in a culture dominated by an occupying government. Rather than collaboration, reform, withdraw or overthrow, the community of Mark called the faithful to develop a "nonaligned stance based on a belief in a new world order to be accomplished through the practice of radical discipleship." At the heart of this discipleship, was the CROSS and the call to serve and sacrifice.

In the midst of crisis, it is sometimes hard to hold onto something new and different. Yet, Mark did just that. At important junctures throughout this gospel, we are assured that to stand fast and be faithful is to be rewarded. In fact, there is "eschatological" assurance that God's hand and protection are present.

At baptism: Mark 1:9-11 (NRSV)

⁹ *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

¹⁰ *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*

¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Transfiguration: Mark 9:2-8 (NRSV)

² *Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,*

³ *and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.*

⁴ *And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*

⁵ *Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

⁶ *He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.*

⁷ *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

Crucifixion brings the pronouncement from Mark 15:37-39 (NRSV)

³⁷ *Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.*

³⁸ *And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*

³⁹ *Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"*

At each of these critical junctures in the life of Jesus there is a divine intervention and confirmation. In the same sense, the gospel assures the community that God is always with the faithful.

What then does this all mean to us in the church in 2009?

It is difficult to be an alternative community within the larger culture. This requires “support, discussion, celebration and confession.” In the context of Mark’s gospel, it is not a viable option to be a lone ranger or solitary Christian. It is essential to have a community to worship and learn with and from.

For this reason, the gathering of the faithful on a regular basis is essential. The early Christians were fortified and strengthened by daily prayer and confession. They shared their fears, worries, and hopes in order to stay true to their call to be disciples of Jesus. In their gathering for worship and instruction, they were reminded of Jesus’ words, actions and call to serve and love. Worship and communion allowed them to stay connected to each other, to God and their mission.

Today, however, our worship rarely hits this mark. So much is squeezed into our Sunday worship that some of the heart and soul is stripped out of it. For most “church goers”, the “church is no longer the place where our souls are stirred, the drama of life celebrated, or the hard questions of our lives and times confronted.” We simply don’t view ourselves and our church in the same way the Marcan church did. To be quite honest, we need to ask ourselves is the church relevant and does it matter?

To dig into this question, we should ask ourselves why we need to come together to worship God.

“Because human beings in our community and around the world are in pain. Because we are isolated and lonely. Because we are tired of how hard life seems. Because we need to have our hope defined. Because we need a place it is safe to weep and be comforted. Because we want to see the future through the eyes of God. Because we face so many problems that we are growing more and more hardened and insensitive to others—and we don’t like it. Because we would like to celebrate and we don’t know how. Because we want to feel God’s presence and experience a peace that passes all understanding.” p. 19

What we need to do is to make our worship more passionate and urgent. How can our worship tap into the deep places within us where we are hungry? How can we approach our worship from the perspective of desire and expectancy, rather than duty and obligation? In the urgency of the gospel of Mark, there is the necessity of training and learning in order to stand against the dominant culture. How well do we know our faith? What does our faith have to say about relationships? Materialism? Suffering? War? Suffering? This gospel calls us to consider how our worship and formation might inform and direct how we live in the world.

- What do you really long for in our worship? What do you usually get?
- When has the ministry of the church really touched and nourished you?
- What do you need to be a Christian in the day to day world? How can the church provide that?
- What issues or problems make you angry about life today? Could the church address or speak to this?

As you ponder being an alternative community, consider these lyrics:

“Walk On” U2

And love is not the easy thing
The only baggage you can bring
And love is not the easy thing
The only baggage you can bring
Is all that you can't leave behind
You're packing a suitcase for a
place none of has been
A place that has to be believed to be
seen
And I know it aches and your heart
it breaks
And you can only take so much

Walk on
Leave it behind
You've got to leave it behind
All that you fashion
All that you make
All that you build
All that you break
All that you measure
All that you feel
All this you can leave behind
All that you reason
All that you see
All that you wear
All that you sense

All that you scheme
All you dress up
All that you've seen
All you create
And all that you wreck
All that you hate
Leave it behind
You got to leave it behind
Leave it behind
You got to leave it behind