

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 8:31-38

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These episodes in Mark are an integral part of the story of Peter's recognition that Jesus is the Messiah. This separation is the result of the focus of the lectionary on theological meaning rather than on the meaning of the story as a story. The elimination of the context makes Peter's response of scandal nonsensical. Likewise the story clearly ends with Jesus' promise of the immediacy of the Kingdom (9.1); preserving the division of the medieval scribe who did the versification is simply to continue to observe his mistake. I would strongly recommend that the whole story be told (8.26-9:1), as Mark clearly intended.

Jesus' prophesy of non-violent suffering and death has no precedent anywhere in the traditions of the Messiah or the Son of Man. It is true that Saul, an "anointed one," is killed in battle. But Jesus does not predict that he will be killed in battle but that he will suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, that is, the leaders of his own people. In the context of the story, Jesus' prophecy is shocking. It is not normal or expected and it is a shock for the listeners. The Messiah was to be a victor, one who would lead the armies of Israel to victory. He was not to be killed and he was especially not to die in the shameful way that Jesus foretells. The intimations of the possibility that Jesus will die in the course of his mission are: 1) the plot of the Pharisees and the Herodians to kill him after the healing of the man with a withered hand (3.6); 2) the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (1.14; 6.14-29); and, less explicit, Jesus' statement that the disciples will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them. (2.20) The arrest and beheading of John the Baptist is an explicit precedent and the plot sounds a note of threat. But there have been no further notices of the development of the plot against Jesus. Since the prophecy is presented in indirect discourse, you can as a storyteller tell this with an attitude of utter shock. If you strongly express this surprise, Peter's response of rebuking Jesus makes sense because he is responding to a shocking thought, that Jesus would suffer and die. In effect, Peter is, as is often the case, expressing the response of the audience.

In light of the tradition of disembodied objectivity in the performance of the Scriptures, it is hard to hear this in a new way. But if the storyteller expresses no surprise in telling Jesus' prophecy and instead simply reports it as a fact, Peter's response makes no sense. It is **essential** that the prophecy be told with an element of surprise and shock. The appropriate meaning of this story depends on the expressed attitude or tone of the storyteller. This is one of those instances where it is crucial that a disembodied neutral tone **NOT** be used in the story.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter identifies this resistance to his suffering and death as coming from the mind of Satan. His command—"Get behind me, Satan"—is a total rejection of Peter's response. Peter is setting his mind on human things—the grief that he would experience,

the reality of death, defeat— rather than focusing on the mind and will of God. Jesus' response is extremely strong and needs to be told in that manner. It is difficult to overdo the degree of intensity that Jesus communicates in this rebuke of Peter. This intensity is not expressed in a loud voice but quietly, face to face. It is best told to the audience, looking at individual members directly, rather than to an imaginary Peter.

The extreme character of Jesus' response to Peter can also be seen by comparison with the other stories in the Gospel where he rebukes his disciples for something with which he disagrees. Those stories are: the other exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name whom James and John rebuked because he was not one of them (9.38-41); the mothers whom the disciples forbid to bring their children to Jesus (10.13-16); and the woman who anointed Jesus' body who was rebuked by some of the disciples (14.3-8). Jesus' strongest rebukes are reserved for those who do not understand his suffering and death, namely, Peter and those who rebuked the woman who anointed him.

In each of these stories Jesus responds with a high degree of passion. All of these are examples of the tradition in the ancient world that the teachers will rebuke their students strongly when they have a radically wrong idea. Teachers in the ancient world were not averse to rebuking their students with great energy and a virtually vitriolic tone. Jesus as a teacher here is functioning in the same style as those who have gone before him. If anything in its ancient context, this establishes Jesus' credibility as a teacher because he is willing to fight for what he knows to be true.

Just as the normal expectation was that the Messiah would fight and be willing to die for the nation, so also the followers of the Messiah were expected to fight and die for the nation in battle. This was the heroic tradition of glory. The classic expression of this tradition is Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*. It was probably the most widely told story in the ancient world. But it is only one of many stories in this heroic tradition, which incidentally continues to be the most popular story in the modern world as the movies reflect. The way to glory is to fight against the powers of evil. The assumption of this myth of redemptive violence is that warfare is the only way in which the powers of evil can be defeated. Overall, the ancient understanding of what it meant to be a man was connected with this willingness to die fighting. In this context, Jesus' description to his disciples of what it will mean to follow him is equally as scandalous as his passion prophecy. He demands that those who would follow him take up their cross rather than, as would have been expected, to take up their sword to fight and kill their enemies. In the first century, the Romans used crucifixion as the means of execution for those who were guilty of resistance against the Roman empire. Taking up a cross implies that one is willing to suffer crucifixion for the sake of the kingdom of God in the same way as Jesus, that is, non-violently. This too is a form of passion prophecy. Jesus will lead them by taking up his cross and they are to follow him by taking up their own crosses.

Jesus' explanation of this shocking statement is that "those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will

save it." That is, the way to save your life is to die in non-violent resistance for the sake of the Gospel. The next pair of statements are a calculation of benefits in relation to one's life: "What will it profit anyone to gain the whole world and lose their life? What can anyone give in exchange for their life?" The assumption behind these statements is that it is fully possible to win victories and to lose one's life in the kingdom of God. Life is defined by life in the new age of God's reign.

Jesus' next statement about shame raises the question of why people would be ashamed of Jesus' words. The theme of the speech helps to clarify this ambiguity. The ancient world was an honor/shame society, even more than our current society. The preeminent way to gain honor was in battle. War is the way to glory and the path to heroism. Not to engage in warfare is to be a coward. It was a source of shame. Only wimps are afraid to fight. Therefore, to be associated with a Messiah who will not use violence was seen by many in Mark's day as a source of shame. Jesus addresses this possibility directly and promises that he in turn will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of his way when he returns in glory.

This is the first time that Jesus directly addresses the radical reconceptualization of the Messiah and of the way to glory that is implicit in his own action and preaching. It is also his first description of the implications of his way for his disciples. The promise of victory is related to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' last statement then is a statement of hope, "there are some here who will not see death until they see the Kingdom come with power." The eschatological promise is that the new age of the Kingdom of God will come soon. What will happen in the aftermath of Jesus' passion is the coming of the kingdom of God and it will happen very soon. The imminent fulfillment of this hope was the substance of Jesus' first preaching (1.14-15). The contrast between Jesus' way of messiahship and the earlier Messiahs, particularly Saul and David, has been implicit in every story. But here it is made explicit.

What then does this story reveal for us? How is it connected with our stories? Here the Gospel of Mark addresses the central questions of our time: what will be the outcome of the battle between the powers of good and evil and if good is to win, how will the victory of the good happen? The most frequently told story in our movies and TV shows is the story of redemptive violence: the evil person or group arises and the good guy wins the victory by violence. The hero is the victor in the violent conflict between good and evil. This is the story that underlies our nation's self-definition and our national celebrations of the power of the military. Jesus' story stands over against this story. The powers of good, the powers of the Kingdom of God, will win the battle against the powers of evil by non-violent action on behalf of the poor, the sick, the crazy, the addicted, and the weak. And when necessary that will mean the willingness to die for the sake of the good. The hero is Jesus and those who follow his way of non-violent suffering and death for the kingdom of God.