

#744 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 3)

Colleagues,

As you'll remember from [ThTheol #742](#) and [#743](#), we're in the midst of the Rev. Dr. Jerome Burce's multipart presentation on the Gospel of Mark, which he first delivered in three one-hour sessions on the day before the official start the Fourth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, in January of this year.

Today's installment brings you the first half of the second hour of Jerry's presentation. Having walked us through the "overture" and the various symphonic "movements" and "interludes" of Mark's Gospel (Movement One: **Around the Sea**. Movement Two: **On the Road**. Movement Three: **At the Temple**. First Interlude: **Mt. of Olives**. Movement Four: **To Golgotha and Beyond**. Second Interlude: **Belleville, IL**, or Wherever), he now takes us through the Gospel a second time, this time with special attention to several key episodes including what he calls the "spit miracles."

By the way, we've made a slight change to our plan (from my introduction to [#743](#)) for publishing the rest of Jerry's presentation. We're splitting his second hour into two pieces, rather than one. And to give you a bit of a break from Mark, we'll put a temporary pause on Jerry's presentation next week and instead bring you a piece that we recently received from Ed Schroeder.

Till then, happy reading of Jerry's intriguing ruminations on the structure and thematic content of Mark.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

1. In this second hour we're going to do a second pass over the body of Mark's Gospel. You're about to find out why. The approach this time will be to dig into specific episodes in each of the first three major movements, and then to poke around a little more in movement four. In the third hour we'll use an episode of the final movement as a springboard into our central question. Once again, how is Mark "gospel"? How is God using this grim tale to deliver good news to us today?
2. To get us started, we'll focus on two key episodes in the Galilean Movement. First, 7:31-37—

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Next, 8:22-26—

22They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man

to him and begged him to touch him. 23He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' 24And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' 25Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'

3. Thus our texts. First observation. In any kind of reading context is an essential key to understanding. That's especially so in Mark, who seems at first blush to string episodes together more or less at random. In fact he doesn't. Instead he arranges carefully as a person might who puts beads on a string in such a way that patterns emerge, and from the patterns come meaning.
4. So, back we go to the start of this movement, 3:7. It will help it will help if you open up Mark and follow along. Again, 3:7: J. withdraws to the sea, disciples following, crowds crushing in, fireworks shooting off as he exorcises and heals. Don't forget the key detail: the crowds are from all around the sea, a mix of Jew and Gentile. They all get Jesus' goodies, and on the same basis. This is of the essence to the unfolding story.
5. 3:13. Jesus goes up a mountain and calls to him "those whom he wanted." (Cf. John, "you did not choose me, I chose you.") He appoints the Twelve, a) to be with him, b) to be sent out to preach, c) to have what it takes to cast out demons. This again is of the story's essence. What will follow is Disciple Seminary, Apostolic Training School, the tag-along version. Watch. Listen. Learn. The key instructional topics: i) Who is Jesus? ii) What can he do, and whom will he do it for? iii) How to run with it.

How to push the project along with the confidence that you can do it too, just like he says, or-just as important-with the guts to do it as he did. A hint at the outset: the disciples are slow, slow learners. As if that should surprise any of us who are disciples today. Like they say, look up slow learning in dictionary, and there you'll see Burce's picture.

6. 3:20-35, first lesson for the new pupils: J. isn't possessed. He isn't in league with the devil. He isn't out of his mind, v. 21, where the verb is *exestee*, another of the words in the amazed/astonished group. Conclusion of the lesson: we who do what God wants are Jesus' family. And what does God want? What is to *theleema tou theou*? Answer: sticking with God's Jesus and following him. Disciples today are still struggling to learn that, aren't we.

7. 4:1-34. The second big school day, featuring parables of the kingdom, crowds pressing in to listen, disciples being taken aside for private instruction. With it comes an explanation that has to be underscored, 4:10-13-

10When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." ' 13And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?

This too is of the essence: there's a seeing that doesn't perceive, a hearing that fails to understand. There is a "not getting it," in other words. Not getting who Jesus is, and what he's here to do, and who he's doing it for.

At the end of 4, v. 34, J. is determined that disciples should get it. "He explained everything in private to them." 4:35: Sorry, right away, on that very day, that very evening, they flunk the first test. There's that storm at sea, 37, where the sea, like the desert, is a testing zone, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"—that's "perish" in the present middle tense, signifying that other forces are involved in the action of the verb, We're perishing because greater powers are doing us in, and "doesn't that matter to you, J.?" My, what a thing to ask! "Shut up," says J. bellowing at the wind and the waves, and instantly, of course, the great calm, v. 39, but—get this—though Jesus' speaking works beyond the boat it doesn't work inside the boat. To the disciples he says, v. 40, "Why so afraid," and "C'mon guys, no faith?" But still the disciples don't calm down. There is bad English translating at this point, v. 41, "they were filled with great awe," NRSV. That's wrong! The Gk: Ephobeetheesan phobon megan, they feared a mega-fear, the same as Luke's shepherds did when the lights went on in the field. "Who is this?" they say. Daryl Schmidt in a technical scholarly translation picks up on the imperfect tense of the verb at this point. He thinks it's deliberate, and not an example of Mark's infelicitous Greek. "Who is this?" they would say"— so Schmidt renders it, the implication being that this particular response by disciples isn't a one-time thing but a regular, ongoing response, the key point being that dealing with a hurricane is a snap compared to dealing with a faithless human heart, even for the Lord of heaven and earth who Jesus has just shown himself to be.W

8. 5:1. They're in the country of the Gerasenes, Gentile turf, Decapolis territory. Get out a map and refresh your

memory. From here on J. darts back and forth, up and down, now with Jews, now with Gentiles, always the disciples tagging along, supposedly to learn something. Here they see J. expel a legion of demons. For me the great question in this story is why the locals don't lynch him over their loss of the 2,000 pigs. Do the disciples notice that the cleansing, saving, freeing work that Jesus does will inevitably result in a large loss to somebody? Do we notice that? When we see others getting annoyed or (these days) dismissive of Christians, do we understand what's going on? Cf. Paul in Philippi, Acts 16:16-24.

9. 5:21. They're back on Jewish turf, again with the crowd flocking at seaside. There are two healings now, Jairus' daughter, and en route to that, the bleeding woman. To the latter J. says, "Daughter"—remember the end of ch. 3, who is J. family—"daughter, your faith has saved you, seswken se." Translators insist on rendering this as "your faith has made you well." I wish they'd quit that. It obscures things that English-speaking disciples today are meant to notice.
10. 6:1. The futile trip to "his own country," where it's Jesus' turn to be amazed, ethaumadzen, at the Nazarenes' unbelief. His turn, in other words, to say, "I can't believe it!" He'll have to believe it, of course. All the other actors in the story will leave him no choice.
11. 6:7-30. This is the disciples' missionary expedition sandwiched around the story of the Baptist's death. Notice how this works, because it's a rhetorical device Mark uses more than once. (This is at least the third time it has already occurred, with prior instances in chapters 3 and 5. In 6:7-13 the disciples are instructed and dispatched, and if you jump directly from 13 to 30 you'll notice how the narrative continues seamlessly. 13 and 20 have been pried apart, in other words, and the Baptist narrative

shoved in—yes—the resulting gap. It makes a point. Apostleship is hazardous to your health. Servants of the kingdom are bound to get snuffed when they run around making like the Baptist, proclaiming, v. 12, that people should repent into forgiveness as God's new way of managing sinners and saving them. Many won't want to. Like Herodias they'll get really annoyed when you shake dust from your feet, i.e. when you signal or say that in failing to repent they're stuck with a system and a God behind the system who's bound to make them dead. Our own contemporaries don't want to hear that. They stop their ears. They shriek. They get bitter and mean. Recall the late Christopher Hitchens, or Bill Maher, perhaps. As we'll hear in the Road Movement, if you're going to follow J. you've got no choice but to take up your cross. Somehow, in some way, you'll get nailed too by the hotshots who hate what J. is doing.

12. Deep breath time. At this point refer to the sheet with the double caption "Spit Miracle" [[available online](#)]. Now a pattern is unfolding. 6:30-44. 5,000 are fed in a wilderness area, eremos topos, on Jewish turf. There are loads of lessons for disciples to absorb if their ears and eyes are open. As the action unfolds all sorts of interpretive info is flowing up unspoken through the gaps, all of it basic stuff that even fishermen and tax collectors should know about, let alone seminary graduates. Haven't we heard of manna in the wilderness? And when J. has them sit down in groups on green grass, v. 39, who doesn't hear echoes of Psalm 23, esp. when we've already heard the mob described as "sheep without a shepherd," 34, and who is the Messiah if not the Ultimate Son of the original shepherd king? Etc.
13. Do the disciples get it? Fat chance. Again, 45, they're at sea, the winds hostile and against them, and J. who had

sent them ahead so he could be alone (who can blame him) comes walking. There's this strange bit, 48, of him wanting to pass them by, again, no wonder, they're an exhausting bunch; though notice here how that detail will always get folks in Sunday Bible classes to be amazed-thaumazein. Startled. Disbelieving. Not my Jesus, they say, as if they own him. In the boat the disciples freak out, 50. Jesus joins them, "take heart," tharseite, it is I, ego eimi, as in "your God is with you" "don't be afraid," the wind dies. Reaction? Again, not calm, not fearlessness, but lian ek perissou en heautois existanto, they really, really, really jump out of their skins. How come? Because 52, they didn't learn the lesson of the loaves, they plain don't get it, their hearts are hardened, petrified, though here the verb can also mean callused, as in eyes covered with cataracts. Keep that in mind.

14. 53-55. More thronging crowds, more healing, people touching J.'s garment as the bleeding woman did (chap. 5) emphasis here on touch. And as many as touched it were saved, esozonto. This is usually translated "were healed," but there's more to it than that. "Saved" is the better rendering.
15. 7:1-23, J. argues with Pharisees about cleanliness and what that involves. Paul Jaster has good stuff about that ([ThTheol #710](#)).
16. 24-30 J. heads for Tyre and Sidon, old Jezebel's turf. Along comes a dirty Greek woman to get help for her daughter. There's patter about bread. The dirty Gk. gets what she asks for, her child lying in bed, the demon gone. Pharisees, stuck as they are on old conceptions of cleanliness, don't cash in like this. Neither do Americans for whom hygiene and exercise is the new religion through which lives will be saved for a few years longer. Back to

the disciples. Did they listen to the patter between J. and the woman? Were they paying attention? We know they weren't.

17. 31-37. At last. We've gotten there. Back to where we started, key text #1. It unfolds in the Decapolis. Again, this is dirty Greek turf. People bring J. a fellow who is deaf and dumb. They ask him to touch him. J. takes him aside, privately. Notice, that's the very thing he's been doing all along with his disciples. And now, yes, he touches. That and more. First his fingers in the man's ears, then he spits, and touches his tongue. And after that a big, big sigh. Ephphatha. The guy hears, he speaks, the crowd goes nuts. They blab. More on this in a moment.
18. First, in chap. 8 the pattern repeats, with crucial variations. 1-9, J. is still on Greek turf. Another crowd is fed. The scenario is the same as at the first feeding, key details repeated, including a note, not to be missed, about compassion as the motive that's driving J. His heart, at least, is not hard. As for the disciples, they're still obtuse. You'd think they'd know the drill, but they don't. They raise the same dumb questions and objections. "How can anyone feed people with bread in the wilderness?" v. 4. What's with these guys? As for the rest of the parallels, do your own comparison. It's very important.
19. 8:10, again a boat ride. 11, again an argument with Pharisees who want a sign from heaven—where have these guys been? Clipping along, yet another boat ride, v. 13, and now more back and forth about bread, not with a supplicant (the Syrophenician woman) but with the disciples who (unlike the woman) don't and will not get it. "Watch out for Pharisee's yeast, for Herod's leaven," J. says, v. 15, and all they can think of is the one loaf of bread that's with them in the boat, and how will they

all eat supper? Whereupon Jesus loses it, v. 17: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened (covered with calluses)? 18Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? Do you not yet understand?" Loose translation: You bozos!

20. 8:22-26. Here is our second key text. Now they're on Jewish turf. People bring J. a blind man this time. Again they ask him to touch him. Again he takes the fellow aside as he has all along with disciples. Again spitting, again touching. Again an odd peculiar twist, very unexpected, not a sigh this time, but a misfire so to speak. J. takes a first pass with his hands and asks, "Can you see anything?—as if he himself wonders if that's in question. Turns out it is—and again, we who operate with our defined set of assumptions about who J is and how he ought to function will be amazed. The guy sees indistinctly, as with cataracts still on. So J. does a second pass with the hands. Now the guy strains to see—he puts some effort into it—and only now is his sight restored, and he sees clearly. "Go to your house," says J. My house is your house—he doesn't say that, but if we hear this being whispered somewhere in the background, it's a pretty good sign that Jesus has been hard at work on our ears and eyes as well.

21. I want to argue that these two miracle episodes, unique to Mark, are at the core his message and of the essence to the good news he means to pass along. So some quick observations just about these episodes—

22. First, that they belong together, to be read as a matched set, ought to be obvious. I won't belabor that.

23. Nor will I belabor how hearing yet not hearing, seeing yet not seeing, is Mark's core concern throughout this Galilean movement, above all where the disciples are

concerned. That concern will continue to preoccupy him in the coming movements too. Well, of course it will, and must. How will his word and work bear fruit, how will folks get saved, how will the forgiveness system get touted as God's preferred option for managing the sin problem if these doltish disciples don't get it?

24. Speaking of dolts, aren't I one of them? I need to remember that as I deal with dolts, hearing but not hearing, seeing but not seeing. Take for instance the folks sitting in Sunday pews. I couldn't make it plainer than I do, but still some will insist on despising the weekly invitation to take and eat, to take and drink—it simply can't be the thing it's said to be, can it? Or I think of the woman lying on her deathbed last month. She's been listening to Lutheran preachers her whole life long—she's been listening to me for the last seventeen years—and still she frets about whether she's been good enough to merit a passage through the pearly gates. So there she lies, riddled not only with cancer but with the leaven of the Pharisees. You talk to her about the way of forgiveness, you rehearse the stories, you recite the promises: still, you can tell as you talk that the words are wasted on ears that are deaf to them. Later, when done, you get in the car and you want to scream. One imagines Jesus' comment: "Welcome, dear disciple, to the misery of your Lord."
25. If anything astounds me in this current tour of Mark, it's the sheer difficulty Jesus has in getting disciples to get it. That's the first thing these two miracles underscore. Signs, John would call them. You and I might refer to them as enacted parables, teaching devices, where you and I are the dim-witted students. It isn't easy to get the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Demons scatter with a simple word. A simple touch heals the withered hand or stops the

flowing blood or raises the dead. Yet faced with deafness and blindness as in a lack of faith, a failure to get it, even Jesus has to roll up his sleeves. For this he doesn't touch, he massages. He uses spit. He groans to high heaven with the sheer effort of doing what he's trying to pull off. He blows the first try and has to make a second pass before the eyes are seeing clearly. Shame on us, then, for thinking that pennies ought to drop and people sing with joy simply because they sat through that brilliant class I taught last quarter, or the sermon series I just finished preaching. Getting people to get it—that's hard, hard work, even for God. This is Point #1 of the Spit Miracles and the wider context they're wrapped in.

26. Point #2, and this is even more amazing, though of course it shouldn't be: notice the dogged determination with which Jesus sticks at it. He won't give up. He'll repeat himself again and again. He'll rerun the miracles. He'll cross the sea for as many times as it takes for the dolts to understand that Jew and Gentile are alike to him in this forgiveness regime that he's here to install and underwrite as God's final word to all humanity. I assume, of course, that the Jew/Gentile thing is the immediate *Sitz im Leben*, so to speak, the issue of issues that Mark has his eye on as he lays the story out. Yes, surely other issues are swirling in the air. Again, Paul Jaster does a splendid job of sketching some strong and likely possibilities: the collapse of the temple, the problem of Rome, the sundering of relations between church and synagogue which is very much in the offing. But if Mark writes for the church, as a tool in Christ's own project to unstop ears and open eyes, then the Jew/Gentile issue which so predominates elsewhere in the NT is surely at the forefront of his thinking here. Hence the dance of this particular movement. Just now we've gotten Paul's letter

to the Galatians in story form. It gets repeated also here because so few in that first-century church seem quite to get it. It gets repeated because the Lord of the Church is driving the repetition, again and again, over and over, until ears are open, yes, and tongues loosed, and eyes begin to see. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is busy groaning with sighs too deep for words, the prayer being that the proclaimers he needs to push the project forward will finally get their wits together and tell it like it is. The Spirit too will not give up.

27. Two last quick notes, and then we push on, as we must. Maybe this is fanciful, but I can't help but connect the double-pass in the second of these miracles with the two-times crowing of the cock in the Golgotha movement. The rooster declares that for all the work Jesus has put into him, this sad-sack disciple is still blind as a bat. He can't see a thing, not even moving trees, which is to say, he hasn't the faintest clue as to who Jesus or what he's up too. It will take a resurrection for the ophthalmologist to try again.
28. Second note, about the spit. He who heals with spit will be mocked with spit. Those who do the spitting will be both Jews, deaf to what they're hearing, 14:65, and Gentiles, blind to what they're seeing, 15:19. And in the hugest of ironies—Mk. drips with irony, by the way—the spitting of the deaf and blind will be the proximate cause of the healing of the nations. You might want to mull on that for your next Good Friday sermon.

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