

A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 1)

Colleagues,

This week we bring you the first part of a paper by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce. At the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January—in fact before the conference officially started—Jerry presented a Crossings-style reading of the Gospel of Mark to an audience of pre-conference attendees. Below you'll find the first installment of that presentation, with the rest to follow in upcoming weeks. In this part, Jerry walks us through what he calls the “overture” of Mark's Gospel, drawing out the recurring themes and important words introduced in the book's first few chapters. At the bottom of this e-mail you'll find Jerry's index of those words, which may want to print out that index for ease of reference while reading.

You'll see, by the way, that Jerry's writing remains in the form of speaking notes, with an outline format and scattered abbreviations (esp. for especially, J. for Jesus or Jesus', etc.). But these small informalities take nothing away from the clarity of his writing, and I trust that you'll find much to appreciate as we revisit his pre-conference talk over the next few weeks.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note: when rendering Greek words with English letters, one wants somehow to distinguish between long “e” eta and short “e” epsilon, and between long “o” omega and short “o”

omicron. To that end I've rendered as follows—

e = epsilone = etao = omicronw = omega

1. Let's start with "joy." Chara in Gk. It's a big, big word in Matthew's Gospel. Think e.g. of the wise men seeing the star, again, at long last, as they close in on Bethlehem. The best translation of the Gk. at this point is the old KJV, "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." Or think of Matt.'s central, defining parable, where the fellow, finding treasure in field, "in his joy" rushes off to sell everything and buy the field. Or yet again, think of the women on Easter morning leaving the tomb with fear and great joy, megala chara, the very thing that the eleven bubble with at the end of Luke's Gospel on their post-Ascension return to Jerusalem, or that they feel, according to John, on Easter night when Jesus shows them his hands and feet. "Echareesan," it says; they "joyed" when they saw the Lord, the one who had said many things to them in the upper room so that "my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (Jn. 15:11). Later comes that other apostle, the Gospeler par excellence, the one who calls the saints at Philippi his "joy and crown" and urges them to "rejoice in the Lord always," and again he will say "rejoice."
2. No wonder then that we who drink deeply from wells of Mt., Lk., Jn. & Paul take it for granted that joy is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as rich, lip-smacking foam is to the kind of beer God meant for all true human beings to drink, and it ain't Bud Light, that's for sure.
3. This brings us to the conundrum that will occupy our attention today. In the Gospel according to St. Mark there is no joy. There flat out isn't. The word chara appears once and only once, and then fleetingly, evanescently. In ch. 4 the folks represented by the seed that falls on

rocky ground hear the word and receive it immediately—euthus—with chara, i.e. with joy, and then poof, it's gone. They have no root you see. Along come troubles and persecutions and again euthus—immediately—these folks fall away. And these, mind you, are nothing more than folks J. talks about. None of the flesh-and-blood types he actually bumps into respond with joy at all, not even a tiny puff of it. And once, only once, do any of them think to glorify God. The contrast with Luke could not be more startling.

4. Mark is the dark Gospel, we might say. So dark that it forces us to ask how the writer can start with an opening sentence that promises good news. So dark that I'm guessing lots and lots of preachers will be grabbing this Easter Sunday for the John option this year. Really, who on the Lamb's High Feast will want to wrestle with Mark's dreadful last sentence: "They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."
5. Fear permeates Mark. It's one of two standard reactions to the things Jesus does. The other, more frequent still, is amazement in an assortment of shades and strengths, conveyed in the Gk. through five different verbs, none of which the translators manage to render all that well. People are stupefied, they're beside themselves, their minds are blown, they become unhinged. Colloquial English does a better job with the verbs than formal English does.
6. The one thing people hardly ever do in Mark is trust Jesus. There are five occurrences of the noun pistis, ten of the verb pisteuw, fifteen "faith" words altogether, and the context in all but four of these is Jesus asking for something he doesn't get. He doesn't get it because the people he's with are blind and deaf. Seeing, they don't perceive, listening, they fail to hear, and especially where the disciples are concerned their minds are thick

like molasses. They flat out don't get it. Twice it says that their hearts are hardened—an assertion you don't see in either Luke or Matthew (see Mark 6:52, 8:17, each occurrence preceded by one of the great feeding miracles).

7. No wonder that in Mark's Gospel Jesus gets impatient and testy, exasperated—"you still don't get it," he asks, ch. 8—and now and then he's downright angry, not just with enemies but with crowds and disciples too, ch. 9. Only in Mark can you imagine the disciples muttering as they tag along about the mood the boss is in today.
8. No wonder too that of the four passion accounts Mark's is the bleakest by far. In Mk. Jesus goes to his death without the slightest trace of human sympathy, support, or remorse, no governor's wife troubled by dreams, no weeping women, no mother looking on with breaking heart, and for sure no Judas despairing or thief repenting. Mark's sole distinct detail is of the young man in the garden running naked into the night. More on that fellow later, but for now note simply how alone Jesus is. In Mark the loss is unrelenting, the darkness unmitigated by the faintest trace of light. And again the last word, even on Easter, is "they were afraid."
9. **Comes the question—the compelling question—how is Mark gospel? How through a tale so stark and grim does God deliver news that's good for us today?**
10. I propose in our time together this morning to start thinking that through with you, all over again, as the case may be. It's not, after all, as if Mark is altogether new to anybody here. Some of you will know it as well as I do, or even better. Feel free to chip in as we go along, please.
11. Here's the approach I plan to take.
 - a. First, we're going to do a quick step through the Gospel from beginning to end, paying particular

attention as we go along to the introduction, then to section divisions, and then to key issues within sections. We'll spend some time also on Mark's vocabulary as a key to spotting the things that matter to him and making connections that the translations obscure.

b. Second, we'll dig more deeply into a handful of specific episodes, chiefly the spit miracles (that's my term; I'll explain when we get there), then the healing of Bartimaeus, and then the account of the widow's mite. We'll think too about Mark's peculiar veaviskos, the young man in the garden, the young man in the tomb, and in the course of that we'll tackle the problem of the ending that isn't an ending.

c. Finally I want to run the Gospel as a whole through the Crossings six-step matrix as a way of getting above all i) to what our deepest issue is in Mark's proclamation, and ii) to Christ, and to what he's doing for those who listen to him as disciples today.

12. Lots to do, so let's get started. Bibles open, please to Mark 1:1.

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13. Section 1. The Overture, you might say, wherein are sounded all the chief themes that we'll encounter in the rest of the tale as it unfolds. **We'll take the intro slowly**, then scoot through the rest (see at par. 23). Start by reading, 1:1 through 1:8...

14. v. 1, The good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Says who? How so, good news? That's the very claim we've got to test. If we don't get there, i.e. if it's not good news for us and for our children, our neighbors, our 2012 world, then get out the scissors and snip away. There's no

point in reading this stuff any longer, and our time will be better spent in making the best of our lives in a bad news world the way everybody else keeps trying to do.

15. v. 2. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah." In fact, he starts by quoting Malachi, 3rd chapter, and gives the opening line of an otherwise hidden passage of such significance that we've got to take the time to look at it. Flip there and follow along, and if in reading you need to hum Handel's recitative and chorus, do so softly.
16. Malachi, then, 3: 1, "Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way, and the Lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple." So guess what, that's precisely where and how Mark will show the Son of God going, to the temple, and suddenly. Forget Johannine chronology. In Mk. there's only one trip to Jerusalem. It launches late in ch. 8, with the sudden first-and-only swoop into the city and temple coming in ch. 11. Once there Jesus will be the refining fire and fuller's soap, Mal. 3: 2, that purifies the sons of Levi and forces them for once in their lives to present a righteous offering to the Lord, not that they'll know that's what they're doing when the nail J. to his cross. (The irony in Mark is everywhere, it's everywhere.) And J. will also bear witness, Mal. 3:5, against oppressors of widows and those who "thrust aside the alien." Much more on that later when we attend to the episode of the widow's mite. For now, there are two things to notice. Notice first how this Malachian passage is the Jerusalem agenda for J. as Mark will tell it, an agenda launched and anticipated in his earlier scampering around the Sea of Galilee, chs. 1-8. When you work through those first chapters, pay attention to how issues of ritual cleanliness keep cropping up, over and over, not just in spats between J. and his opponents, but in the fact, e.g., that the bleeding woman is unclean, and so is the dead

girl, and so is the leper, and so are all those other denizens of the crowds who touch or get to be touched by the fuller's soap (Mk. is big on touch, again we'll see that more closely); and as for demons, they're not just demons, they're unclean spirits—that's Mk.'s standard term for them—and like blood stains they're intractable, impossible to purge until now, suddenly now, when Mr. Clean is on the scene. That's what's coming, first in Galilee, then in Jerusalem where Mr. Clean will go crazy.

17. The second big thing to notice—and this I think is absolutely critical to grasping Mark as good news: notice how all this Malachian advance notice of Jesus' agenda is in fact tucked into the gap between 1:2 and 1:3, and there it lurks, hidden away where the untutored crowds are bound to miss it. Disciples, on the other hand, are meant to catch it, which is not to say that they do. Still, to them has been given "the secret of the kingdom of God" (4:11). Let me suggest—this is my personal thesis; have others suggested it? I don't know—that when reading Mark the secret of the kingdom, i.e. of what God is up to for us in J., lies in the hidden recesses of gaps like the Malchian gap we've just noticed; and for us today it will lie especially in a yawning gap that we'll get to at the very end. It's there, in a post-Markan gap, so to speak, where we'll find God's answer to our central question, which again is the only real question, namely how does Mark's "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" emerge as good news for all of us today?
18. Pushing forward, then, still in Mk's introduction, v. 3. Here he does quote Isaiah, ch. 40, "Prepare the way of the Lord," where "way" = Gk. hodos. Hodos will be a key marker for identifying a major section break in ch. 8. Further, "make his paths straight," where "straight" = Gk. eutheias, a near relative of euthus, "immediately." Euthus

is one of Mark's huge words, as you'll see on the vocabulary sheet. Straight eutheias paths enable one to be immediate, euthus. What makes for a straight path we'll get to shortly, but first, another gap thing, the stuff from Isaiah 40 that Mark doesn't reproduce but assumes disciples will pick up on, as disciples trained by good old Handel are certain to do, yes? What's hidden in this gap? Mountains laid low, valleys lifted up, the glory of the Lord revealed so that—get this—all flesh shall see it together. All flesh, not just Jewish flesh, all people seeing together, and there you have two huge Markan motifs, esp. in the Galilean section, though in Jerusalem too. Again the vocab sheet: seeing—eidw, also bleppw, anableppw, thewrew, horaw—is an incredibly important word, where seeing means spotting the glory of God in Jesus (the Son of God), and not elsewhere. The grim surprise of Mark is how few people wind up doing that. They don't hear so well either. For Mark, seeing and hearing are paired concerns, and huge concerns at that, both of them. Again, check the vocab sheet, akouw (“hear”).

19. v. 4. Comes now John the Baptist preaching (keerusw) a baptism—a washing, a new way of getting clean—which involves “repentance for the forgiveness of sin?” No, “repentance” into the forgiveness of sins where forgiveness is God's alternative way of dealing with the human sin-problem, alternative, that is, to the temple way, or to the mind-the-p's-&-q's-of-Moses way, or to all the other ways that human beings cook up to cope with each other's sin. Here's the thing: turning away from those other sin-solving schemes and into forgiveness as God's preferred scheme—being open to that forgiveness, being willing at least to look at the thing—is what will make Jesus' paths straight and progress immediate. By contrast, folks who are invested in the other schemes—esp. the few

folks whose power, income, reputation, etc. derive from them—will want nothing to do with forgiveness, and their resistance will slow the Lord down. Look at the vocab sheet. Notice how the occurrences of euthus are bunched in the opening Galilean chapters and diminish after the turn to Jerusalem in ch. 8. Why? Because Galilee is swarming with old-system losers who are hungry for something new that will serve to save them. Jerusalem by contrast is run by old-system winners. They're out to defend their turf and the perks that go with it. It's the same deal today. On Wall St., in academia, among cultured cosmopolitans, among all the winners in our secular sin-management systems, Jesus gets mocked and his church withers. In Africa, we hear, the losers flock to him. There his paths are straight, the results immediate, and the church thrives. (Well, sort of. Disciples are running the show, and as Mk. shows, disciples have issues.)

20. v. 8. Note quickly how John promises the coming one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. That never happens in Mark as it does, say, in Jn. 20. This is significant. Again we'll get to that later.
21. v. 9, J. is baptized. He comes from Nazareth. He won't return there, except very briefly. The announcement signals God's blessing and authorization for everything he's about to do. What's esp. important here is that J. sees and J. hears-and takes it seriously as obtuse disciples will not. Here's the first hint in Mark of what Luther will call the alien righteousness that will be his preeminent and saving gift to those of us who don't see and don't hear. What Jesus sees, by the way, are the heavens "torn apart" as the temple curtain will be. It's the same Gk. verb in both places, schizw as in schism, as in the rending divisions that religious systems everywhere are rife with. Let me suggest that here God is creating a

schism of his own, the one that will occupy Paul, but will also drive the underlying theological drama in the rest of Mark, i.e. a schism between God's very own Moses-system and his new Jesus-system. The former keeps the heavens closed and God distant and hidden. The new one tears the heavens open and leaves us looking at the very face of God-for-us in the person of Christ. From here on the two systems will be in unrelenting conflict.

22. By the way, if you're at all struck here by the force of the verb, not to say its violence, see how that's continued in v. 12, where the Spirit "drives" J. into the desert. In Matt. and Lk. the Spirit "leads." Here the verb is *exballw*, to toss out, to give the boot to, so to speak. *Exballw* is what J. will do to the unclean spirits he encounters in Galilee and later to the traders infesting the temple in Jerusalem. A bit of pure speculation: is the Spirit teaching him here how hard and tough he'll need to be when he rolls up his sleeves and gets to work? Alternatively is the background to this the scapegoat driven into the desert, having bathed in the sinners' bath and gotten covered with their dirt?

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23. 1:14. John goes to jail, Jesus to Galilee. Now the fun starts—fun also for us because I've got to speed things up. From here on I do my best to fly, observation only, comment at a minimum. **We will focus on the many things that get a first mention in this Markan overture**, so to speak, wherein themes are sounded, almost all to be repeated and developed later.
24. 1:14 again. Jesus comes into Galilee. He invades it, as it were, preaching (*keerusw*) the Gospel of God. And into v. 15: this is the first and only announcement of the kingdom's onset. Jesus does the announcing. In Mk. (versus Matt. and Lk.) the Baptist makes no mention of it.

"Believe the good news," J. says. But people don't believe it. They won't believe it.

25. 1:16. The calling of the first four disciples. They leave former things behind and follow J. Euthus. Immediately.
26. v. 21. First stop at Capernaum, hereafter J. home base. He wastes no time. He teaches euthus, in the synagogue. On the Sabbath, the day of rest. Forgiveness means rest. I'll bet that's what he teaches.
27. v. 22. First of the standard reactions to what J. says and does. Astonishment. Amazement. See the vocab sheet for the range of words. The verb here is ekpleessomai. Fear often accompanies this, phobeomai.
28. Also v. 22: first appearance of "authority" as J. distinguishing characteristic. Exousia, as in ex-, out of, ousia, nature, being. That which emerges from who you are. He talks and acts as one greater than Moses, as the author of Torah and not its interpreter. No wonder they're surprised.
29. v. 23: first appearance of an unclean spirit with a big mouth, first exorcism. First instance of J. barking at somebody or something. Note: the spirit cries with a loud voice, megala phonee as it comes out. Same thing J. will do when his pneuma, his breath/spirit goes out of him in the moment he dies.
30. v. 27. More amazement, more talk of authority. And immediately, euthus, his fame spreads, 28.
31. v. 29. First healing, Simon's mother-in-law. 30, The first touching of the ill, the unclean. J. takes her by the hand and raises her up. First little resurrection in other words.
32. v. 32, first flocking of people at Jesus' door. The first mass healing.
33. v. 35, J. first escape to a lonely place, an eremos topos, where eremos is wilderness. First effort to dodge the

crowds for a moment. Fat chance.

- 34. v. 36, first hint from Simon that people want him, are on the hunt for him. v. 39, first refusal to be pinned down, first tour of Galilee. First mention of exorcism as a first and foremost activity with preaching, *keerusw*.
- 35. v. 40. First and only healing encounter with a leper who also has a cleanliness issue. He'll have supper with Simon the leper when the woman anoints his feet, ch. 14. Still in v. 40, the first instance of somebody raising questions about J. motives, "if you want to". 41, First mention of pity, compassion, churning bowels, *splangnistheis*, as J. compelling motive, and God's too; though an alternative reading has J. getting angry, *orgistheis*. Also 41, first use of *haptomai*, touching, as frequent aspect of Jesus' healing method. And here J. stretches out his hand to do that; God drove Adam from the garden lest he stretch out his hand for the tree of life. The phrase in LXX (Septuagint, the standard Gk. translation of the OT) is exactly the same as the one here. Old Adam stretches his hand to steal life on his terms. The new Adam—the Son of Man/Adam—stretches the hand to give life on God's terms. Later the same hand will be stretched again and nailed in place.
- 36. v. 43. First (or second) mention of J. getting testy and driving somebody away, *exballw* again. Don't tell, 44, but the guy does tell, 45, in fact he starts to *keerusw*, to preach; the crowds swarm, J. starts hanging out in the *eremois topois*, the deserted places, not "the country" as in NRSV.
- 37. End of chapter 1, we're all exhausted, and it's only just begun. This, folks, is Galilee. It's God among the losers.
- 38. 2:1-12, J. back at Capernaum, second mention of people swarming the door of his house; the paralytic's pals lower him through roof, Jesus sees their faith, the pals', not

the sick guy's; he responds by forgiving the sick guy's sins. First time J. mentions forgiveness. First time the scribes perk ears up and start to bristle. First mention of blasphemy as J. essential crime in his opponent's eyes. First claim by J. himself that he has what it takes, the exousia, the authority to do what he does. First and only instance of amazed people glorifying God.

39. 2:13, first occurrence of the adverb "again," palin in Greek. We'll encounter this "again" again and again. See your vocab sheet. I'll argue later that palin is of the essence to the Gospel as Mark tells it. Here J. is again beside the sea, the first time being when he called the first disciples. This second time is the first time that a crowd shows up on the shore, and he teaches them.
40. 2:14, he calls Levi. The word for Levi getting up to follow is anastas, as in rising. Think of this as another little resurrection, the first step in becoming a disciple.
41. 2:15, the first meal with sinners, not necessarily in Levi's house; in Mk. it could be Jesus' house. 16, the first Pharisaic grumbling about the company J. keeps—or entertains.
42. 2:18, the first query about disciples' behavior—by "some people," not yet by scribes and Pharisees—the query being about their failure to fast. 2:19, the first parable, the first explicit bit of teaching. New cloth and old garment, new wine and old skins, they're not simpatico. This is J. first direct critique of the sin-management system presently in place.
43. 2:23-27, first mention of disciples on "the road" or "the way," hodos, again, a huge word later in Mark. First argument between J. and Pharisees about what is and isn't "lawful." Exestin in Gk., a verbal form of exousia, authority. That's what the big issue is finally all about.

Does J. have the right, not to say the chops, to override Moses, whether with respect to plucking grain on Sabbath, or healing a withered hand on the Sabbath, 3:1-6?

44. 3:1, the second “again,” as in again in the synagogue, 3:2, the first instance of opponents deliberately out to catch him, 3:5, the first—or maybe second—mention of J. being angry, orgee, and the first mention of hardness of heart as the underlying issue. Finally, a second stretching out of a hand, this time an old Adam hand reaching for the new Adam—who responds with a healing.
45. 3:6. The enemies start plotting to destroy J. End of overture. All the themes are in place, all the bells have gotten their first clear ring. Now comes expansion on the themes as the rest unfolds.

Some Key Terms in Mark

euthus, as adjective, rendered “straight”:

1:3

euthus, as adverb, rendered “immediately,” “at once,” “right away,” etc.

1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42,43; 2:8, 12; 3:6; 4:5, 15, 16, 17, 29; 5:2, 29, 30, 42 (twice); 6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54; 7:25, 35; 8:10; 9:15, 20, 24; 10:52; 11:2, 3; 14:43, 45, 72; 15:1.

eidw, see (44 occurrences)

1:10, 16, 19; 2:5, 12, 14, 16; 4:12; 5:6, 14, 16, 22, 32; 6:33, 34, 38, 48, 49, 50; 7:2; 8:33; 9:1, 8, 9, 14, 15, 20, 25, 38; 10:14; 11:13, 20; 12:15 (twice), 28, 34; 13:14, 29; 14:67, 69; 15:32, 36, 39; 16:5.

Plus occurrences of-

blepw, 14

thewrew, 7

anablepw, 6

horaw, 7

akouw, hear (40 occurrences)

2:1, 17; 3:8, 21; 4:3, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 33; 5:27;
6:2, 11, 14, 16, 20 (twice), 29, 55; 7:14, 16, 25, 37; 8:18;
9:7; 10:41, 47; 11:14, 18; 12:28, 29, 37; 13:7; 14:11, 58, 64.

ekballw, drove out, give the boot to

1:12, (done to Jesus), 34, 39, 43; 3:15, 22, 23; 5:40; 6:13;
7:26; 9:18, 28, 38, 47; 11:15; 12:8.

palin, again

2:1, 13; 3:1, 20; 4:1; 5:21; 7:14, 31; 8:1, 13, 25; 10:1, 10,
24, 32; 11:3, 27; 12:4; 14:39, 40, 61, 69, 70 (twice); 15:4, 12,
13.

The amazement/astonishment group (22 occurrences)-

thambeomai, stupefy

1:27; 10:24, 32.

ekthambeomai, stupefy plus; "freak out"

9:15; 14:33 (Jesus in Gethsemane); 16:5,6.

ekstasis (n) and existeemi (v), state or act of being
unbalanced, out of one's mind, having an out-of-body experience

2:12; 3:21 (said of Jesus: "he's nuts!"); 5:42 (first as v, then
as n, they "ecstasied a mega-ecstasy"); 6:51; 16:8.

ekpleessomai, shocked, stunned, driven from one's senses, one's
"mind is blown"

1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18.

thaumadzw, to wonder, marvel, scratch head in disbelief

5:20; 6:6 (Jesus); 15:5, 44.

ekthaumadzw, the above, and then some

12:17.

phobeomai, fear, be afraid

4:41; 5:15, 33, 36; 6:20, 50; 10:32; 11:18, 32; 12:12; 16:8.

thalassa, sea

1:16; 2:13; 3:7; 4:1 (twice), 39, 41; 5:1, 13 (twice), 21; 6:47,

40, 49; 7:31; 9:42 & 11:23 as teaching images only.

hodos, road, way

1:2, 3; 2:23; 4:4, 15 (teaching images); 6:8; 8:3; 8:27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 21, 46, 52; 11:8; 12:14 (in opponents' set-up question).

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