Worship Resources : Contextual Bible Study Notes for September Lectionary Readings

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Readings from Mark chapters 7–9

These readings are taken from the central section of Mark's Gospel which links the story of Jesus' powerful and largely successful Galilean ministry, culminating at the end of chapter six with Jesus sweeping through the region healing all and sundry, with the narrative of Jesus' journey to his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. This section is marked by the controversies in which Jesus is increasingly involved, by his predictions of his passion and death and resurrection, and remarkably by his transfiguration (not included in the lectionary readings here). Faced with all this the disciples stumble and wonder, quite unable to make sense of it all, as their hopes and expectations are constantly challenged. The passages were read by an Episcopalian group in Greenock in the West of Scotland.

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

This is for many readers a deeply puzzling passage. What is the issue here? Why are the Jews concerned with washing, not least in a country where water is scarce? Why are hands described as 'defiled' and not just dirty or grubby? Is there a problem with cleanliness in the market such that they need to purify themselves? To some it seemed that Jesus does not address the questions raised by the Pharisees but rather shifts the whole debate away from the specific questions about traditional notions of purity to the motives of those who were questioning Jesus. They were trying to exclude people on the basis of their traditions, whereas Jesus was inclusive, pointing to the essential questions about a person's inner motivation, which is what makes him or her 'pure', that is to say, what really makes them good, 'acceptable' members of a community. The question, that is to say, is not about who is in or out, but rather about what is needed for someone to be a valuable member of the human community.

To answer this Jesus makes a fundamental distinction between human traditions and God's commandments. Human traditions may be fine; it's almost impossible to do without them. We can't always be working things out from scratch. But there's a serious problem if traditions which enshrine inherited ways of trying to lead a godly life start to become means of discriminating against others, marking them out as impure, defiled, abominable. How do we decide which traditions to uphold, which to modify or discard, if we ultimately seek to be faithful to the will of God?

This problem is pointed to indirectly by Mark's asides to his audience, as he explains to a Gentile readership/listeners what the customs of the Jews were. There's no suggestion here that Mark is expecting his readers to take over these legal rulings. He identifies them as 'the tradition of the – Jewish – elders', something which doesn't directly affect his readers. And the existence of such cultural diversity, which is evidenced in these editorial asides, raises sharply the question: how are we best to decide and act when we are confronted in a similar way by competing traditions in our own society, even within our own churches?

How then does Jesus answer the challenge presented to him by the Pharisees in the seemingly quite reasonable question: why do your disciples not obey the traditions of the elders? He answers it, said one reader, on the basis of his 'knowledge of humanity'. The fundamental question is not about conformity to tradition for conformity's sake: the question is which traditions foster human integrity, promote inclusive and healthy human societies and relationships, help us to combat those things in our hearts which make us resist the will of God: 'hatred,

hedonism, mammon, bigotry, sectarianism, racism, selfishness, drugs and drink dependency, materialistic lifestyles'?

How then might a group of Episcopalians judge, say, the liturgical traditions which they share? 'Good' traditions would be ones like the common cup, the chalice, which symbolizes the unity and the participation of all in the grace and promises of God. Again, west-facing celebrations of the eucharist stress the corporate nature of the eucharist meal, the fact that all enter into a new community, where they can be 'renewed for the service of the kingdom'. 'Bad' traditions would be ones which discriminate, which emphasize difference: e.g. seat rents, the exclusion of women from the conduct of worship and leadership in the church.

The point is not that traditions are necessarily opposed to the commandments of God. It's when they become a barrier to people's pursuit of God's will, to the development of the kind of human integrity and love which God desires, that they must be scrutinized, adapted and if necessary dropped. As the rest of the Gospel makes only too clear, this process of sifting the tradition, of bringing change in order to allow the love of God to grow in people's hearts, is profoundly costly.

Mark 7:24–37

The group was asked to consider what is being said about the nature of healing in these two narratives about the Syrophoenician woman's daughter and the man with hearing and speech impediments. In one way the two stories are quite strongly contrasted: the encounter between Jesus and the women is highly verbal, with her wit outwitting Jesus, – or, was it rather that he 'allowed her to win the argument'? Whatever the case, once she has won her point, Jesus simply announces that the demon has left the daughter. With the man the encounter is more physical, conducted through touch and gesture, Jesus putting his finger in the man's ears, spitting and touching his tongue; only at the moment of release does Jesus, looking up to heaven and sighing, speak the one word: 'Ephphatha', a word where all the consonants are formed by the lips and are thus most easily lip-read.

But there are also similarities. Both stories are about release: the release of the daughter from the attacks of the demon; the release of the man's tongue, the unstopping of his ears. The images of healing are ones of blessed normality: the child lying peacefully in bed, the man hearing and speaking clearly, able to engage in normal human converse. The stories remind us of our creatureliness, that we are part of the created world – if a special part – part of a process of pain and renewal and restoration.

Both stories, too, show Jesus wanting to remove himself from the crowds, show his 'need for privacy'. Most notably at the beginning of the first story, Jesus tries to go into hiding, to find quiet and 'refreshment from engagement with the crowd', 'to recharge his batteries', to 'avoid spies, priests, Pharisees'. In the second story, too, Jesus needs silence to engage with the man and subsequently tells the crowd not to tell anyone about the healing. 'Miracle cures are not what he is about – teaching is more important, teaching through miracles.'

What then do these stories teach us about Jesus, about the human condition, about healing? In the first place, they remind us that we are not immune to the vagaries of our physical or mental constitutions. Being human means being part of a created world which includes, as an integral part, pain and suffering. At its best, 'pain tells us that something is wrong and that something should be done'. Suffering 'can bring out the best in us', not that this necessarily makes the suffering any the less easy to bear: who knows what miseries had been suffered by the people in these stories? And of course not all suffering has an obviously restorative outcome. Nevertheless we need to accept that the experience of pain and suffering at different levels and degrees is part of what it is to be human and that they can and do form part of a process of growth and renewal. Becoming a Christian doesn't mean that we enter a suffering-free realm: it does mean that we may have resources to face up to such suffering and to use it for our and other's good.

Where then do we find healing today, and of what kind? For the group, the interest lay less in physical healing, where we have quite different resources today from those at the time of Jesus, more in the areas of mental and social suffering and disorder. Part of the problem lies here in the increasing fragmentation of our social and communal lives. For those who can cope, the easy moving between different networks of friends and colleagues which characterizes much urban life is lively and fulfilling, but for those who find such ways of relating more difficult, the lack of a 'given' community of which

one is a part, like it or not, can be daunting and damaging. The man with his terrible social handicaps serves as a reminder to us of these contemporary disabilities. Jesus' attention to his particular needs, his drawing him aside to bring him into his own intimate sphere to 'speak' to his needs, is an image of what true friendship and healing can be. Our church communities need to become healing communities in this sense, where people can experience the blessed normality of peace and free and open conversation and dialogue with each other: in this way they can be bearers of grace and restoration.

Mark 8:27–38

This passage introduces the theme of Jesus' passion and cross. It introduces it at what could easily be seen to be a highpoint of Jesus' ministry to his disciples, who here, in the person of Peter, confess him as the Christ. But, immediately, the inadequacy of that confession becomes clear as Peter rejects Jesus' prediction of his coming ordeal. Reactions to the passage on first reading were diverse: some were struck by the violence of the language. Jesus' public rebuke of Peter as Satan, after Peter had taken him aside and spoken to him privately, was 'very severe'. In the same way the language in the passage about taking up one's cross is sharp and accusatory: it is an adulterous and sinful generation which refuses to acknowledge him; they are to deny themselves and to submit themselves to an instrument of torture. How does this relate to the question Jesus asks: 'Who do they say I am?' and to his offer of a new life in his service?

One of the striking features of the text is the number of questions and commands which it contains: Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? What will it profit? What will you give in return? Do not tell anyone about me. Get behind me Satan. Deny yourselves. Take up your cross and follow me. The group were invited to think about the disciples' situation and their position in the wider community in which Jesus was working to see what light it might shed on this passage.

The disciples are drawn from the village-based communities in which Jesus preaches. He does not go to the larger towns in the area but works almost exclusively in the hill villages and lakeside villages peopled by small-scale farmers and fishermen. This is an area of serious poverty where people are longing for some dramatic divine intervention to save them from their misery. They are eagerly awaiting the Messiah and the question is: is Jesus the one? Clearly there is a measure of uncertainty and different views are circulating about who Jesus is. The disciples are go-betweens between this volatile community with its heightened expectations of some prophetic figure who will release them from their poverty and radical insecurity and Jesus with his message of the coming rule of God. They have already made a choice to follow him but they also share the hopes of their people for a military saviour who will remove their foreign overlords. What is happening here is that the nature of that choice and the nature of Jesus' 'messiahship' is being spelt out to them in no uncertain terms. He is far from being the powerful warrior messiah who the people are expecting; his announcement of his impending suffering and death evokes a powerful rejection from Peter and an equally sharp reproach from Jesus.

How are we to assess Jesus' response? It could be seen as 'quite bad tempered', as 'a mixture of man-management and teaching', even as the expression of 'righteous' or 'constructive anger'. Whatever the precise emotional tone of the remarks, what seems clear is that the intensity and 'violence' of the language here is closely related to the crucial nature of the question under discussion: who do people say that I am? The question is crucial because it is the central question about the nature of the divine power which Jesus represents, whose agent he is. Is he to be the instrument of God's vengeance on his enemies? Or is he to be the one who through his suffering will transform the world, bringing new life and reconciliation? The kind of divine power which Jesus represents is the costly kind of love which effects transformation rather than simply removing all opposition. The disciples need to be quite clear about this and about the kind of life to which they are being called. It means a denial of the worldly ways of power and manipulation and a willingness to make costly decisions, 'denying oneself'.

Where do such choices occur for Christians today? What do they need to take up and what do they need to deny? The choices we make still matter and they can be costly. We may have to face the consequences if we oppose sectarianism and racial discrimination. But equally 'denying ourselves', breaking with negative habits can be life-giving. Sitting in front of the television is itself a kind of 'denial of life'. We need to create time for

others and for God, to turn our back on short-term satisfactions and to look at the bigger picture, to give our support to aid organizations, to charitable work and to 'prayer' work. The danger is that as a church we are not sufficiently challenged. The extremeness of Jesus' language is indeed shocking to us but it may be precisely the kind of language that the church needs to hear before it becomes too comfortable and conformable to the times.

Mark 9:30–37

This passage provides further evidence of the disciples' failure to understand what Jesus is about, specifically what understandings of power and authority underlie his preaching of the kingdom. The setting of the sayings in vv. 33–37 is interesting: Jesus is again on a journey, again seeking not to be known, 'still travelling and teaching' about his passion, death and resurrection. The disciples, confronted for the second time with this solemn prediction of his death, realize – in the light of Jesus' sharp rebuke to Peter? – that they don't understand what this is all about, how it can be that the Son of Man/Messiah should suffer, but they are afraid to ask for any explanation. Instead, as they confess when they get to 'the house' in Capernaum, they turn to discussing who is greatest among them. It is obviously a question which greatly exercises them and they return to it when James and John, after Jesus' next passion prediction (10:33–34), ask to sit at his left and right hand 'in his glory', presumably when he is victorious over the Romans.

There is, that is to say, a structural similarity between the three passages which contain Jesus' passion predictions. In each case his prediction is followed by a wholly inappropriate reaction of one or more of the disciples, which in turn is followed by a teaching response by Jesus. Here in this passage, Jesus has to get the disciples to say what it was they had been doing as they journeyed on after his prediction and this is then followed by two further sentences, the first about the nature of leadership and greatness, the second related to his gesture of taking a child and picking it up in his arms.

Here, that is to say, we see Jesus struggling to enlighten the disciples, with remarkable lack of success, at least in these three chapters. They simply cannot take in the idea that Jesus will suffer and die and will not resist or fight for power. And rather than starting to reassess their own hopes and expectations, they persist in dreaming about the positions of power and influence they hope soon to occupy. Jesus' response is firstly to offer a kind of riddle: 'If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all.' It's a nice paradox, which is somewhat blunted for us with our 'service culture'. More sharply, one might say: if anyone wants to be master he must become a slave. It's a call for a radical renunciation of power. Of all power?

The 'answer' is tied up in Jesus' symbolic action of taking a child in his arms. He points his disciples to something which is more fundamentally human than the exercise of political power, something which lies at the basis of all social life: the warmth of spontaneous loving given to children. People who make such deep, spontaneous, heartfelt love the centre of their loves, have 'embraced Jesus', are living the life to which he calls people, are empowered by the spirit of God.

So there's an open question for the church today: how do we call people to live out of such power, to put such openness and unconditional acceptance at the heart of their lives. We might start at least by looking at the way we receive and welcome young parents and their children into our churches. Do we resent the noise and disturbance? Do we have liturgies and forms of service which genuinely embrace and speak to them? Are we driven by our love and affection for them to challenge their exploitation by commercialism and consumerism, 'the commodification of childhood' which destroys the very nature of childhood, turning children into adults before they have had a chance to play and develop in a safe and protected environment? And as we place children at the centre of our communities, do we learn something about our fundamental values and the true direction of Christian life, which is not a slavish, servile acceptance of others' rules and orders, but rather a creative caring for the weak and the helpless in our midst?

Conclusion

There are many strands running through these stories and it would be a mistake to reduce them to one particular theme. Nevertheless one dominant theme stands out in these readings, the search for human integrity, for true humanity, for the kind of power and the kinds of values which will enable people to overcome their brokenness and find renewal and restoration. This is powerfully figured in the images

of the child sleeping peacefully after release from her demon, of the man speaking clearly and sharing in normal human conversation, of Jesus taking a child in his arms. God's kingdom is one where these values of open love and inclusiveness, of healing and restoration, of peace and human conversation are central. But as the repeated predictions of Jesus' passion and his call to the disciples to take up the cross and follow him remind us, these are values which require a renunciation of old ways which only comes at a cost.

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A KING IN THE EYES OF HIS COURT

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Keith Bodner has assembled a nicely interlinked set of essays in *David Observed* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005. £50.00. pp. xii + 198. ISBN 1–90504–823–8). He shows us how Eliab is used first to rebuke Samuel, then David (2); strengthens Pamela Reis's proposal to read the priest at Nob as colluding with David (3); enlists Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of 'pseudo-objective motivation' in reading the end of 2 Samuel 3 (4); offers a literary account of the three episodes in which Nathan appears (5); ponders the 'layers of ambiguity in 2 Samuel 11:1' (6); and connects the claim in 4QSam[a] as well as Josephus that Uriah was Joab's armour-bearer with the defection of Ahitophel and the death of Absalom (7). Two further essays explore deliberately free 'readings' within 2 Samuel 11–12. Joab here as elsewhere reinterprets David to David's benefit, but to his own ultimate demise (8); and his messenger to David (in the shorter MT at least) either bungles his assignment or cleverly averts the king's presumed anger (9). The final essays consider Ahitophel's motives (10); 'Solomon's succession and Jacob's knavery' (11); and 'doing things with oaths' in 1 Kings 1 (12), with the help of Austin on performatives. Bodner is a shrewd reader; and it is good to know that he is preparing a commentary on the books of Samuel.

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CHAOS AND CREATION

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Our understanding of the theology of creation is one clear beneficiary from the ongoing dialogue of theology and the natural sciences. Sjoerd Bonting, in *Creation and Double Chaos* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005. £12.99. pp. ix + 275. ISBN 8–0063759–3), offers valuable material on this topic, from the perspective of a biochemist who is also an Anglican priest.

Bonting analyses the findings of the sciences concerning the origins and development of the universe, and sets these alongside ancient creation narratives, from the Bible and from other early religious sources. He examines the traditional Christian understanding of creation *ex nihilo*, finding it unsustainable (and, in practice, accepted by contemporary theologians to a very variable extent). He presents instead a 'revised creation theology' which he calls 'Chaos Theology': this asserts that there is an 'initial creation from primordial chaos', followed by 'continuing creation with remaining chaos'. This 'remaining chaos' will be abolished with the perfection of creation at the eschaton.

In working through the consequences of this idea, Bonting offers reflections on areas as diverse as the problem of evil, God's action in the world, the person and work of Christ, genetic modification of human and non-human species, and the theological implications of extraterrestrial life. The 'double chaos' of his title appears to refer to the way in which ordered systems can degenerate into chaos, in addition to such systems arising from chaos through the creative activity of God; but this idea is not explored in any depth.

This book is a stimulating, scientifically well-informed read. If it occasionally appears theologically unsophisticated (for example, in its discussion of the term 'Cosmic Christ'), this should not deter anyone with an interest in the important theological issues which it covers.

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