

Time and space in Mark

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Mark has been a constant puzzle to me. I didn't much care for it for a long time. His sense of urgency and spareness of narrative left me feeling I was reading the Cliff Notes of scripture. That began to change a few years ago when I took a hard look at whether Mark was as immediately this and immediately that as I assumed. What surprised me was that the narrative slows down after the first few chapters, with very little immediacy present. It encouraged me to pay more attention with more patience.

What Mark has done, whether on purpose or by accident I have no idea, is to provide enormous space for questions and imagination. He does that by making huge leaps in time and space. Take this coming Sunday's gospel for instance. In it Jesus leaves the shores of Galilee, appears without warning in Tyre, jumps from there to the Decapolis, and in the process expands the circle of those included far beyond the comprehension of his followers.

What went on in the days required to walk from one place to the other? What teaching took place? How was the Syrophoenician woman explained to the disciples? Did they stop at home for a few days as they passed back through Galilee on their way to the Decapolis? Why did they go there at all? Mark provides as much room as possible for us to join with the disciples in asking all of our questions, trivial and profound. Between the sentences of a spare narrative, we can take all the time we want. Mark, I think, should be read slowly, maybe only a few lines at a time leaving hours or days between, using those hours or days to engage in conversation with God and others, unafraid to let our imaginations go to work.

If I had set out with Jesus to walk to Tyre, what might I have said to him as we made camp on the first night? "Hey Jesus, a word please. What the hell are we going to Tyre for? We don't like them. They don't like us. We're not convinced that the few Jews there are really Jews. They don't speak our language. They smell bad. We could get killed along the way. You know what they're like, they're just going to hound us

for money and rip us off with high prices. I don't get it."

What might Jesus have said to me? "In the unlikely event that you complete your training as a disciple, you will thank me for this little adventure because you are going to learn something about your own prejudices. Take my advice, suspect your own judgments, talk a little less, and pay attention. Maybe you can come with me on the next trip. In the meantime, consider yourself on probation."

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