

Do You Not Understand? Mark 4:10-13

So, we are here this evening once again on the eve of a new semester. In my journey I have been at this point many times. But somehow I sense that this year it is a bit different.

Many of the key events in the culture during the past summer, to say the least, were disheartening. Especially this is the case if you view yourself as a vital part of conservative religious communities. In just a few months we have witnessed the nationwide legalization of marriage between people of the same sex. Many are amazed at the studied indifference to the revelation of a flourishing trade of human remnants coming out of abortion clinics. We know little will be done about it! And, of course, the barbarism in the Middle East continues to hit greater depths of depravity. What is going on?

Those familiar with this school can no doubt recall strong words from the faculty about the need for the church to consider itself as an ‘alternative moral community’ to the world. This emphasis stands as one of our watchwords. As early as the 80’s in the early days of *Christian Studies* we championed Stanley Hauerwas. He talked about Christians as ‘resident aliens’ who ought to oppose many of the trending liberal policies inherent in the Western system of culture. But, now reflecting on all that was said, a lot of this kind of talk seems to be stale. It seems to have come from afar – academic chatter at home in the lunchroom rather than the real world.

Now it is different. Today there is no doubt that traditional Christians who accept the historical faith of the people of God are marginalized from contemporary mainstream society. Our version of Christianity is openly branded in significant places as ‘totally outdated’ and completely unacceptable to mainstream contemporary values. The veil is now pulled away. The culture says the goal of absolute freedom must be fulfilled; otherwise you are sectarian. To be an ‘alternative moral community’ will take fortitude and courage. We may pay a price to be faithful. We now know what it really means to be marginalized. So we come to the new semester with a sense of being a bit shell shocked. Yes, some of us are demoralized. What does it mean to study theology in the midst of all of this background noise?

I have been thinking about the Gospel of Mark lately. I believe it does resonate as a good word for us in our present situation – whether we are a beginning student or seasoned scholar. I admit Mark is a bit murky about the specific circumstances under which it was composed. But it seems to address a church facing cultural hostility. What does ‘the gospel’ it speaks about in 1:1 say to that? How does it deal with persecution and the subsequent loss of zeal and numbers in the church?

Mark does one thing very clearly. He reminds us that we signed on to follow one who was abandoned by even his own followers; and, he was put to death by the ‘power elites’ of his time. Is it really odd that we who have signed on to finish the journey with him might also get a taste of the same thing?

The Markan Mystery

Yes, there will be bumps along the way. As early as Mark 4:11 Jesus tantalizes the Twelve with the stunning offer: “to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” Yet almost immediately after speaking the parable of the Sower he asks, “Do you not understand this parable?” It was a lesson in disciplined discipleship! Persistence in following the way. What is there so hard to get about that? But this dullness continues. Faith is lacking. After the feedings of the multitudes Jesus says again to them “Do you not yet understand?” (Mk 8:21). And as for the church; as late as Mark 13:14 there is a little aside, “Let the reader understand!” Even at the end we hear about a young man at the tomb speaking to the women, “He has risen, he is not here” (Mk 16:6). Do they ever get it? Disciplined discipleship. Ah yes! But it is not that easy. If it were, why do most not get it? Is it only a matter of not having enough faith? Perhaps we need some knowledge as well. Here, I believe, seminary can play a role.

Someone has used the Latin phrase *ars est celare artem* to describe Mark. Roughly speaking it says: ‘real art conceals the actual presence of art.’ Yes, faith is indispensable. But I venture to say that we also need to engage in disciplined study to plough through Mark’s fragmentary style that often conceals a complex network of linguistic connections that deepens his meaning. Seminary is a place where that can be done.

For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light (Mk 4:21).

So what I am saying this evening is that the church could do with a good dose of disciplined study of the Word and seminary can be the place to see what that is all about. Yes, in order to accomplish that bring along your faith; but add to that study perseverance. Welcome aboard! And, oh yes! For those of us who are a bit demoralized over what is going on in the culture perhaps we need to get back to the Word and hear the good news:

Humanly it is impossible. But not with God; for all things are possible with God! (Mk 10:27)

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