Mark's Passion Narrative

A STORY OF ABUSE AND FAILED INTIMACY

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In this liturgical year B, 2003, Mark's Gospel is the focus of our worship. It is the Gospel by which the Christian community is nourished and the action of God in its struggle and in the world is confirmed. The high point of the year is Holy Week with its spotlight on Mark's story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. How might these stories speak to us, especially in the light of some of the most pressing issues that we have ever faced, within the Church and internationally?

Within the Church, and specifically within the Catholic community, I think of the tragedy and sadness associated with sexual abuse. Globally, we live in a world of fragile peace with revenge and aggression the hallmarks of international politics. Given these contexts, what fresh perspectives can Mark's passion and resurrection narratives offer us?

In what follows I suggest a way of reading Mark's story of Jesus' suffering and death from a particular perspective. I want to focus on what happens to Jesus bodily. I would like to continue this in a following article in which my attention will be on Mark's story of Jesus' resurrection (Mk 16:1-8).

Jesus' Suffering and Death: A Story of Abuse?

It is important, first, to place the passion narrative in the overall context of the Gospel story. The first chapter begins in the wilderness with the preaching of John the Baptist. From this setting of homelessness, the symbol of total absence of intimacy and companionship, the Gospel begins; from here the first words of Jesus are spoken and his active ministry begins. Jesus' activity, how he acts and the clear literary signals which Mark gives with the frequent use of 'and' connecting Greek sentences give the hearer a sense of ongoing motion, almost feverish activity. It is a 'performance' Gospel.

Mark's emphasis on Jesus' physical conduct and activity clearly indicates the importance and role of his body in his proclamation of God's reign and the formation of the community of disciples. As the rest of the Gospel unfolds, Jesus' quest is to reveal the nature and manner of the true discipleship household. This quest for home, the antidote to homelessness and intimacy's absence, shapes the rest of the Gospel.

The first half of the Gospel reveals the characteristics of Jesus' household of disciples, though flaws begin to appear. As the Gospel moves into its second half, internal issues within this household become transparent. Opposition to Jesus mounts from the religious and political leaders, and surprisingly also from those closest to him—his kinship group, immediate family and especially his disciples. The disciples quarrel amongst themselves, are blind to his deeds and deaf to his message. As we come towards the final chapters, Mark has been leading the auditor towards what awaits: Jesus appears misunderstood, unheard and re-
jected. Religious and political hostility reaches flashpoint. The powers of authority mount against him to annihilate his influence and what are perceived as messianic pretensions. These leaders conspire to debase and dishonour him.

The evangelist in the preceding chapters has strategically prepared the Gospel audience for all this. In one sense, there are no surprises to the attentive reader. But in another, the power of darkness, evil, conspiracy, silence and absence that confront Mark’s Jesus are almost too powerful to comprehend, let alone bear. He is without comfort, human or divine; he is victimised and abused. At another level, what is done to Jesus’ body is a metaphor for what is happening to and within the body of Mark’s Christian community.

Mark’s Passion Narrative

Mark’s passion narrative falls into three parts. Part One (14:1-42) offers the evangelist’s perspective for reading the rest of the narrative. Part Two (14:43-15:20) narrates the trials of Jesus and the failure of the disciples. In Part Three (15:21-47) all the major themes of the Gospel and its insight into the experience of abuse/absence draw together with the concluding story of Jesus’ crucifixion, death and burial. This links to and prepares for the Easter event (Mk 16:1-8) the final story of the Gospel.

While space does not allow a thorough reading of the whole passion narrative, I would like to highlight four scenes: The anointing of Jesus’ body which prepares for his farewell meal with his disciples (14:3-9; 17-31), the garden arrest (14:32-52), Jesus’ treatment under interrogation (14:65; 15:16-20), and the death scene (15:33-39).

Throughout the narrative, and particularly in these scenes, Mark is not presenting a dispassionate historical depiction of events but a portrait of one who is deserted and abused. The evangelist’s interests are fundamentally theological and pastoral.

The anointing of Jesus’ body and the farewell meal (14:3-9, 17-31)

The passion narrative proper begins with the presentation of the interpretative perspective by which the whole story is to be interpreted. This takes place in two scenes that are set inside households in which Jesus gathers with his disciples and attention is paid to his ‘body.’ Immediately in the first of these, Mark juxtaposes the two reading strategies that will help to either liberate the Gospel audience or entrap it further into incomprehension. The two perspectives are intimacy with the person of Jesus, or his denial and betrayal. These are given to us by the way Mark deliberately frames the faithful act of an unnamed woman with acts of plotting by male religious leaders and one of his own disciples.

A-The public plot against Jesus by male religious leaders (14:1-2)

B-Body Focus: The household anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman (14:3-9)

A1-The public betrayal of Jesus by one of his own (14:10-11)

These surrounding stories of betrayal enable the focus to fall on what the woman does to Jesus’ body. This is where Mark intends our gaze to rest and from where the reader gains a perspective of Jesus, already known from the preceding chapters and now confirmed in the woman’s deed. The setting for this anointing occurs in the house of Simon the leper at Bethany. Jesus is present here with
his disciples. In Mark’s view, this is a household of disciples. What happens within it is significant for Mark’s community—it reveals the attitudes and qualities that it needs for its ongoing life.

The context for the anointing are also not without their significance: on the outskirts of the great city of Jerusalem, in the house of one whose physical and bodily features make him marginal. Marginality and bodily uncleanness, at least as socially prescribed, provide the setting for what the woman does.

Mark notes that Jesus ‘reclined at table’ (14:3), similar to what he does with his disciples in the next scene when he gathers with them for the farewell meal. In this setting an unnamed woman, an ‘outsider,’ performs a profoundly symbolic act to Jesus. She breaks a flask of costly ointment and anoints Jesus’ head, an act reminiscent of First Testament anointing of prophets and kings.

For the Gospel reader attuned to the First Testament and the anointing of its prophets and kings, the woman’s anointing of Jesus’ head would be filled with symbolism. The woman’s act is Mark’s unequivocal statement about Jesus’ identity. He is prophet and king—titles that will be ironically reinforced at the conclusion of two trials and in death. Both trials conclude in his abuse with the first paradoxically identifying him as prophet; the second as king. With the head, a human being engages the world and society. It is a person’s essential bodily feature of social contact and interpersonal engagement. Through the face a person’s humanity, spirit and mood is most tangibly encountered and expressed. A person’s head, incorporating the face especially, reflects the total person. What is done to the head and face, is done to the body. If the head is honoured the whole person is respected. By implication, if the head is dishonoured, the totality of the person is abused.

The woman’s gesture is typically criticised by some of Jesus’ other disciples present in the room. They misunderstand and misinterpret its meaning. Gospel hearers, however, know Jesus’ true identity. They have known this from the beginning of the Gospel and are now reminded of it in the woman’s act. With this perspective of Jesus’ identity reinforced at the beginning of the passion narrative, they are now ready to journey into the rest of the narrative as Jesus suffers, his body dishonoured and abused. The lavish ministry of this woman disciple to Jesus’ body prepares for and links to the burial of Jesus. It therefore anticipates the resurrection. It also connects to the next scene of Judas’ offer to betray Jesus (Mk 14:10-11) and to what follows in the upper room of a house.

After some disciples prepare the room for the Passover, Jesus and the Twelve gather with the rest for the meal (14:12-17). As with the anointing, this farewell meal occurs in a context of betrayal and failure. The scene is centred on Jesus’ words and actions over the bread and cup. What is said and done underpins the importance and value of Jesus’ body.

While they were eating and taking bread, Jesus having blessed it, broke it and gave it to them and said: ‘Take, this is my body.’ (14:22. My translation.)

The Greek structure of this verse emphasises the two key actions ‘broke,’ and ‘gave.’ These are the principal verbs. The bread, identified with Jesus’ body and in which the disciples are invited to participate, is broken and given. It can only be shared by being broken. The two acts are interconnected. In this eucharistic setting and anticipating the rest of the passion narrative, Jesus’ body is going to be broken and abused. The broken bread—and Jesus’ abused body—is what is given to the community of disciples for its nourishment. The meaning of this will be more fully revealed in the summary and climax in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The Garden Arrest (14:32-51)

After the meal, the scene changes from a household to a garden where discipleship failure reaches its climax. The tragedy of the scene is that in Jesus’ darkest moment the disciples
are portrayed as physically tired. At the deeper level, they are unable to spiritually bear what is about to happen. Mark interprets their avoidance of death and failure, and their unwillingness to really follow a suffering Messiah as tiredness.

Into the midst of this community, slumbering and still unable to see, marches the betrayer, Judas, with an armed and violent crowd sent by the Sanhedrin (Mk 14:43-50). They have come to arrest a dissident. In an act that represents a profound abuse of friendship, solidarity and, trust Judas kisses Jesus. This not only indicates to the captors the one to arrest, but it also signals the way in which Jesus is going to be treated. An act of greeting and intimacy has become the ultimate sign of betrayal. It is an act of abuse.

The kiss to Jesus’ face, and the intention that accompanies it, reveals everything: The outward show of honour to the body of Jesus symbolised through the intimate touch to his face is false; it becomes an act of dishonour and exploitation. Intimacy has become a subterfuge for abuse. The face of Jesus, and his body, honoured by an unnamed female disciple in an earlier scene is now exploited and abused by a named male disciple. The contrast could not be clearer. Abuse that is unchecked, unnoticed and unnamed festers. Judas’ act spreads and influences other disciples. One of them violently wounds the slave of the high priest.

Two acts that are an abuse of intimacy and companionship—though this time not by Judas—complete Jesus’ betrayal. First, the disciples have misunderstood the non-violent reform which Jesus has advocated from the beginning. Now, towards the end, they completely break their allegiance to him. All that remains is for them to flee the scene. Mark simply notes, ‘All of them deserted him and fled.’ (Mk 14:50) Second, before the close of this first part of the passion the evangelist focuses on the enigmatic figure of a young man.

A certain young man was following with Jesus wearing a linen cloth over his nakedness, and they seized him. Leaving the linen cloth, naked he fled. (Mk 14:51-52)

The meaning of the young man and the linen cloth (in Greek, sindon) are not clear. From the bodily perspective that guides our reading of the passion, the twice-mentioned nakedness of the young man is significant. In the ancient world, the deliberate exposure of another’s nakedness was the supreme act of public shame and dishonour. This scene represents a culminating moment in the public abuse that a disciple accompanying (‘following with’) Jesus endures. Like Jesus, so too the disciple. The disciple’s nudity occurs through the forceful removal of the garment (‘...and they seized him...’). It is an intentional act, explicitly physical and sexual, that is intended to humiliate. It is in this state of sexual exposure and public disgrace that the figure flees the scene.

Perhaps at a deeper level the whole scene is symbolic of the decimated disciples and what is occurring in Mark’s community—the desertion by newly baptised Christians in the face of suffering and opposition. The story has also overtones (‘linen cloth’ and ‘young man’) that will be picked up in the burial and resurrection stories later.

**Jesus’ treatment under trial (14:65; 15:16-20)**

After Jesus is arrested he endures two trials, both designed by Mark to underscore and summarise the Gospel’s portrait of Jesus. Both end in his physical abuse.

Jesus’ first trial before the high priest and the Sanhedrin appears almost as a comic event that feigns legal propriety. The conflicting perjury of witnesses reveals the essential conflict between Jesus’ vision and the practice of a bankrupt leadership. Before his accusers Jesus is silent. Their testimony deserves no comment and allows a string of key christological insights to emerge: Jesus is the Messiah, Blessed One and Son of Humanity (‘Son of Man’).

The first trial scene ends with Jesus ac-
knowledged as the authentic proclaimer of God’s word who sits in judgement on his accusers. In the midst of the physical abuse graphically hurled at him Jesus is declared prophet.

Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophesy!’ The guards also took him over and beat him. (Mk 14:65)

The following morning heralds the beginning of the second trial (Mk 15:1-5) this time before Pontius Pilate, the military procurator of Judea from 25 to 36 CE. In this civil trial, Mark reveals the key theological motif, which links it throughout—Jesus’ kingship. In Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus, his address to the frenzied crowd and in the final scene of his physical torture before he is sent off to death, Mark clearly wants Gospel readers to know that this abused figure is paradoxically God’s regal agent.

Pilate has Jesus flogged and then hands him over for crucifixion, the typical form of death reserved for a political revolutionary. Before leading him away for execution, however, Pilate’s leading soldiers gather a whole cohort of soldiers (which could range in number from between 200 and 600) to perform the mock coronation ritual (15:16-19). The ritual irony in the physical torture and abuse that Jesus endures would not be lost on Mark’s readers.

Jesus’ death (15:33-39)

The crucifixion is described by the evangelist with an economy of language. The royal Jesus goes to the place of death accompanied by a rural attendant who carries his cross.

The starkness of description allows the reader to focus on the theological motifs that gather here at the Gospel’s culmination of Jesus’ abuse. While implicit in earlier scenes, this abuse is not only physical, it is also sexual. This is illustrated in the manner of Jesus’ crucifixion presumed in the narrative and inspired by Psalm 22:19, ‘And they crucified him and they divided his clothes among them...’ (15:24). With this simple statement, Mark implies that Jesus is crucified and dies naked with genitals exposed. As he hangs naked on the cross, on the instrument of Mark’s narrative climax, he is publicly exposed and atrociously humiliated. Jesus’ penis, the ultimate symbol of his sexual power and physical and social identity in an agonistic Mediterranean world, becomes the means of his ultimate disgrace. This is reinforced by the three taunts that he is subjected to provoke a final temptation—self-salvation: ‘Save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ (Mk 15:30). Over verses 29 to 32, the ridicule from these jibes becomes more painful as the circle of scorners expands to embrace the whole religio-political spectrum of society who gaze on his nudity and enjoy his utter powerlessness. Throughout, the naked, abused and verbally taunted Jesus hangs as God’s faithful and obedient anointed one unwilling to force God’s redemptive hand. He is a helpless and solitary victim of ridicule and misunderstanding.

These verses (15:29-32) also represent the beginning of a balanced literary structure saturated with misunderstanding and confusion over Jesus’ true identity. The centre of this section is the misinterpretation of Jesus’ death cry as a cry to the prophet Elijah, rather than what it really is—an unrelieved appeal to his God in the words of Psalm 22:2 ‘My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me!’

Response to Jesus by those at the cross:
Misunderstanding (15:29-32)
| Cosmic Setting: Darkness over the land (15:33) |
| First Cry: ‘Eloi,...’ ‘My God....’ (15:34) |
| Misunderstanding by bystanders (15:35-36) |
| Second Cry: Death (15:37) |
| Temple Setting: Curtain tears (15:38) |
| Response to Jesus by the Centurion: Faith or Ultimate misunderstanding? (15:39) |

As the high point of Mark’s Gospel arrives, the literary composition of the scene illustrates how the rejection and misunderstanding ex-
experienced by Jesus throughout the Gospel pursues him to the bitter end. They coalesce with the physical and sexual abuse enacted against him to totally dishonour and annihilate his sense of identity. His last words ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') in the spirit of Psalm 22, brings the reader to the most profound moment of Jesus' passion. Here, in this anguished cry of the dying Jesus, is the realisation that the experience of abuse and desertion can rob one of a sense of divine intimacy. Jesus is the exemplar of the abused victim searching for comfort, security and intimacy, and meeting only rejection, misunderstanding, distance and silence. Mark's Jesus experiences a God of silence and distance. To an outsider looking on, it raises the unthinkable: Is God, too, an abuser?

While Jesus' cry expresses an utter sense of abandonment, even by God, there still remains in him the confident hope that God will deliver. While Jesus screams out his experience of desertion and abuse, he still addresses God as 'My God'. Here in the dying Jesus, Mark's readers see the authentically religious and holy one experience ultimate abandonment. They also witness his fidelity in the midst of this most traumatic moment. God may seem to be an abuser, Jesus believes that God is not. Even to the end he maintains his filial relationship with God; he does not break it despite the final temptation of feeling utterly abandoned.

Jesus hangs on the cross ultimately forsaken and the victim of a final, cruel act of abuse, summed up in the experience of being forsaken. The bystanders misinterpret his prayer of abandonment as a cry for Elijah the prophet, who will return on the last day to rescue the faithful. With this definitive thrust of suffering, the tortured and abused Jesus utters a death scream and dies. His death brings about the tearing of the curtain temple, perhaps symbolising that Jesus' death becomes the moment for temple access to God. It also causes the centurion to utter: 'Truly, this man was God's son' (Mk 15:39c). Though most have taken this as the ultimate statement of explicit faith, Greek manuscripts offer no hints as to whether there was an exclamation mark at the end of the declaration ('!'—hence making the declaration a statement of faith) or a question mark ('?'—indicating perplexity, even ridicule). If Mark's intention is the second, and this seems supported by the literary structure of the scene, then what we have in this final moment in Jesus' death scene, is an ultimate act of dishonour and abuse...

**Conclusion**

From this brief reading of Mark's passion narrative from a particular perspective, it is clear that Mark's dying Jesus is a pathetic figure. He is honoured and truthfully identified at the beginning of the narrative. His body is anointed and prepared for what is to unfold. As the events leading to his death transpire, Jesus is abandoned, betrayed, kissed and dishonoured. Further, I have been suggesting that a corporeal reading of the narrative sensitive to the somatic characteristics of the story's principal character, Jesus, reveals more than one who is simply maltreated, suffers and eventually inevitably dies. I have been putting the case forward that Mark portrays Jesus as a victim of abuse, physically and sexually. Such an approach in reading Mark's passion narrative deconstructs and replaces the conventional anaesthetised reading of the passion that we have grown used to. It is one that speaks powerfully to the experience today that many within our churches have of abuse.

Mark's passion narrative, a story of abuse and failed intimacy, grounds its readers firmly within history, no matter how desperate, lonely and tragic that history is. This is the kind of grounding that we in the Church need today, as we enable those who have been abused to find a voice and to find a small spark of hope in the figure of Mark's suffering, abused, abandoned and misunderstood Jesus.