

# **What to be – how to be Discipleship and Vocation in Mark’s Gospel**

## ***by John Vincent***

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# Introduction: Mark and discipleship

## The great questions

What to Be  
Who to Be  
How to Be  
Whose to Be  
Where to Be  
With Whom to Be  
What to Do

The great questions of discipleship and vocation have to be faced by every would-be Christian.

There are many resources to go to. The Bible is an obvious one. And in the Bible, Mark's Gospel is an outstanding one.

## Mark and disciples

The Markan discipleship tradition provides a crucial entry to Christianity for a number of reasons:

- Mark's Gospel was written by a disciple – possibly John Mark, possibly based on the memories of another disciple, Simon Peter.
- Mark's Gospel is about Jesus, but it is Jesus seen through the eyes of the disciples. It is a disciple's view of Jesus that we get. Almost, you have to deal with the disciples to get to Jesus.
- Mark's disciples are a notoriously controversial collection of people, and their problems and questions are a vital part of the Gospel story.
- Mark's Jesus spends a lot of time with his disciples. Often, it is 'Jesus and his disciples', or just 'they'. Jesus was pretty clear about what his disciples were supposed to be and to be doing.

## Discipleship today

All down through history, Christians have been would-be disciples – have seen themselves as trying to be contemporary followers. So what might that mean for us today?

Behind this, of course, are *our* questions. How can we be 'followers' of Jesus? What issues that we have today can get help from these stories? How can we as disciples today get together our own lives in the light of this tradition? What might it mean for each one of us, personally and together, to follow this way – or even just bits of it?

*Note:* Some of these responses were first developed in the Study Year of Urban Theology Unit, described in 'Practice Criticism in Action' in *Reading the Bible* (SCM, 2006) page 208. There, the theme is introduced with a study of the Call to Discipleship, Mark 1:16–20.

# 1. Be different!

## The kingdom has come

After John had been imprisoned,  
Jesus went into Galilee crying out the good news of God.  
'The great time has arrived,' he said,  
'The Kingdom of God has come near.'  
'Be different, and trust yourself to the good news.' (Mark 1:14-15)

The first disciple / vocation priority is 'What to Be'.

The gospel is the 'Good News'. It is the good news that the Kingdom of God is now present on this earth. It is the good news that Jesus represents the Kingdom. It is the good news that all kinds of new possibilities are present and required as a result.

My first assumption is that future Christians will increasingly return to the pattern of Jesus. We will be needed as bringers of good news – of news that people and things can be different. This is the gospel.

My argument is :

- i. Society does not need Christians or churches which are merely reflections of contemporary society's own life.
- ii. Society needs something which is 'news'. It needs to know, and see before its eyes, ways of doing things differently. So it might notice a Christian or a church which was different. The Kingdom, and the Kingdom community which Jesus started, was 'different'.
- iii. Individual people need to know that things could be different. That would be 'good news' – at least for some. And others would then know what they were up against!

### To do

Experiment with yourself. Do anything which is fairly radically different from what you normally do. Try to get the feel of something that is the reverse of what you usually do. (For example: Get up at 5:30 am. Go running each morning. Drink water instead of eating for supper.)

### To study

Read Mark's Gospel. As you do so, list ten main things that the Kingdom seems to be about.

### To discuss

Produce in your group your lists about the Kingdom. Vote them into orders of priority. What kind of 'alternative' programme arises for us today?

## 2. Be relevant!

### The lifestyle of disciples

One time, Jesus was going beside the lake. A large crowd came out to him, and he taught them. As he walked along, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting behind his tax collector's desk.

'Follow me', Jesus called, and Levi got up and followed him.

Jesus went to have dinner at Levi's home, and many taxcollectors and 'sinners' came to eat with him and his disciples – he had many followers. When the teachers of the law, who were Pharisees, saw him eating with 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?'

Jesus heard it, and told them, 'A doctor isn't needed by healthy people, but by the sick. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners.' (*Mark 2:13-17*)

Vocation is about 'Who to Be'.

The first 'sign' of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry was an outbreak of unsocial behaviour – so Mark 1:16-20 and 2:13-14 :

- i. Employees left their jobs without giving notice.
- ii. People with possessions found someone or something else to give them to.
- iii. Relations were put in embarrassing situations by relatives leaving home.

The second 'sign' of the Kingdom was the irresponsible behaviour of the person who had asked people to do these things – so Mark 2:15-17 :

- i. He celebrates the kingdom as if it belonged to traitors and evil-doers.
- ii. He lets his disciples do what they like (see Mark 2:18-20).
- iii. He presumes to call himself a 'doctor' – but the wrong people get healed.

These are signs of the authentic church, if we want a church following on the practice of Jesus.

So, the question for us today about our discipleship is: To whom and to what are we relevant? Who benefits from what we are and do? How do 'outcasts' benefit?

#### **To do**

Investigate the actions of local Christians and churches. Discover who their friends are. What actions have been done which have caused criticism?

#### **To study**

Who celebrated the good news in Mark's Gospel? List some of the people who go a lot out of it, and who end up celebrating.

#### **To discuss**

For whom are you or your Christian community 'good news'? Who celebrates it?

# 3. Be ecological!

## What to take with you

Then Jesus went around, from village to village, teaching.

Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits.

Then he instructed them as follows :

'Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals, but don't take an extra coat.

When you go into a house, stay there till you leave the town. And if anywhere does not welcome you or listen to you, shake off its dust from your feet as you go, as a witness against them.'

*(Mark 6.8-11)*

Vocation is about 'How to Be'.

So, the Twelve – fishermen, a tax collector, a resistance fighter, and a banker (Judas) – do as Jesus says. They give up everything and become disciples.

They go about 'with Jesus' (Mark 3:12) and learn to imitate his ways. Then, after a time, it is their turn to go out and do as he has done – to announce the Kingdom, to teach about its alternative ways, and to heal people as a sign that the Kingdom changes everything.

To do this, they are not only told to forget about what they had left behind, of personal livelihood. They are also told not to accumulate things that would only get in the way. If they are penniless, then others would help them. Especially, they are not to be like the travelling teachers of the law, who were given payment for their teaching.

The model has recurred at decisive moments in church history: Francis, the travelling Friars, John Wesley and his preachers, William Booth and his officers. It occurs today, where people here and there divest themselves of their money, pool their gifts with others, and live on only what they need.

The model recurs wherever there is determination among a few disciples to get into radical obedience.

The future church will certainly have to learn to live without a lot of money. There will be mounting pressure on it to give away its investments. And there will be fewer people giving money to it. And everything will cost more! A few prophetic bits of church existing on a shoestring today will help people to go into it joyfully tomorrow.

Necessity might make us more ecological. But what about doing it voluntarily?

### **To do**

Make an inventory of your present possessions. Put down their market value. List your annual income.

### **To study**

Look up the standards of living of poor people in certain countries overseas – Bolivia, India, Bangladesh, Chad.

### **To discuss**

Work out an alternative budget for yourself, now and later (when you have more money?).

## 4. Be committed!

### Losing life, gaining life

Then he called the crowd to him, with his disciples, and said to them :

'If anyone wants to come after me, they must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and walk behind me. Anyone who wants to preserve their life will lose it. But anyone who loses their life, for me and for the good news, will save it. For what good is it, if someone gains the whole world, but loses their life? Or what can anyone give as a substitute for their life? Also, if anyone is embarrassed at me and my words in this adulterous and sinful time – the son of man will be embarrassed at them when he comes in his Father's glory, with the holy angels.'

*(Mark 8:34-38)*

Vocation is about 'Whose to Be'.

The call to surrender life is the call made not only to disciples but to everyone. It's a new way of living. It's losing, in the faith of gaining sometime later! It's being prepared to lose everything else, so that you get Jesus and the good news. The group of life-losers are really life-gainers. But they do not look much like it. They get embarrassed and ashamed at their stupid, self-denying, unsuccessful, perverted way of life.

The future church is going to have to decide whether it is to be an affluent church, a successful church, a church that does as well as everybody else, a church that you can be proud of – or whether we are prepared for it to be a poor church, a failure church, a church that does worse than everybody else, a church that you can be embarrassed at.

Lifestyle changes usually come out of social, cultural, educational and locational influences. Who you are, what you are, what you read, what education you had, and where you live, are the decisive factors – they will determine whose you are.

So we need to work at alternative influences, which might change us. For example :

- i. Set up or use existing life-training centres among people, places and cultures that we want disciples to imitate.
- ii. List the formative values and standards that are the norms of society which the gospel community has to respond to, and work out alternatives to them.

#### **To do**

Find out some groups in your town who stick to some rather odd or untypical habits or attitudes. What do they give up, to keep these habits? Are they embarrassed at times by them? (For example: other faiths, health clubs, vegans.)

#### **To study**

Build up a list of the characteristics of the disciples' way of life in Mark's Gospel.

#### **To discuss**

How could you or your Christian friends witness to the good news by adopting an alternative lifestyle? Specifically?

# 5. Be significant!

## Leadership and servanthood

They arrived in Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about along the road?'

They did not answer, as their argument had been concerning which of them was the top man. Jesus sat down and called the Twelve to him, and said :

'If anyone wants to be the one at the front, he must be the one at the back, and act as the servant to the rest.'

*(Mark 9:33-35)*

Vocation is about 'Where to Be'.

Discussions about who wants to be 'top-dog' seem to be inevitable among groups of any kind. The early Christians, like the disciples, wanted to have a 'pecking order'. In every well-run organisation, everyone has a place, and everyone knows their place. Jesus says it is not to be like that for his disciples. To be league-leader in the Kingdom, you have to be league-trailer among fellow disciples. And the mopper-up as well.

This really seems to exclude disciples from the kind of leadership which the world 'needs' to run its industry, commerce, politics and public services. What the saying of Jesus means is clear. And it cannot be argued round by saying, 'Well, I'll take a top job, but I'll act as if I were a bottom person'. Sociologically, culturally, financially and in terms of business and prestige, it is just not possible. So Christians who do get landed with top jobs have a built-in contradiction in what they do.

But is the kind of leadership Jesus describes possible? How do you deal with male domination, hierarchy, professionalism, lifetime service (pensions!)?

### **To do**

Go and visit a religious order, or a local alternative or para-church, and report on the leadership pattern there.

### **To study**

What tasks or jobs or occupations or pieces of work carry on Jesus' ministry in your area?

### **To discuss**

What does this mean for our own 'vocation'?

# 6. Be together!

## Solidarity and community

Then Peter said, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'

Jesus answered, 'Indeed, I tell you, anyone who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or wife or children or lands on my behalf, and the Gospel's, will receive a hundred times as much, now in this present time – houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, lands – plus persecutions! Also, in the coming time, the life of that age. But many who are first will be last; and many who are last will be first'. (Mark 10:28–31)

Vocation is about 'With Whom to Be'.

'Denial of self' is a vital part of New Testament Christianity. But it is economic, practical, self-denial, not 'spiritual'. The twelve disciples had almost everything taken from them by Jesus. They had 'given up all'. Similarly, the believers in the Acts of the Apostles had to abandon their previous religious, cultural and social status. So did Paul. So did Gentiles who became Christians.

'Common-ness', or 'Having thing in common', was therefore a natural thing for people who had lost or given up their previous status, possessions, and often relatives, income, position and race. The New Testament word *koinonia* means 'the existence of *koinos*' – and *koinos* means 'common'. *Koinonia* thus is 'common-ness'. It is, in fact, the word we translate as 'sharing', or more often, 'fellowship', but its real meaning is 'common-ness', 'common-ality', 'common-ism' – or even 'communism'.

'Community' is thus native to Christianity. Hence, Peter's question. Jesus's reply is half humorous, half serious, describing a reality partly already experience, and partly ultimate or future. Already here and now, discipleship gives one compensatory wealth, relatives, assets, homes! It's already happening – people taking other disciples into their homes, people sharing what they have because they have given up much of their wealth, people who live together, work together, mission together, marry each other – and thus, of course, sing and pray together.

Present-day Christians and churches are beginning to rediscover solidarity and community in these senses. The question is, What style of 'common-ness' is for us? A walking-distance congregation, shared accommodation, or a shared project, are all options. It's not a question of whether we can 'have all things in common' (Acts 2:42). Rather, it is *how much* could we have in common?

### To do

Arrange a residential project for your group, working in an area of need.

### To study

Read up the story of a contemporary Christian Community and church in an inner city area. An example by the present writer is *Hope From the City* (Epworth Press, 2000), price £8.95.

### To discuss

What style of community is for your group? Or for the future?

# 7. Be political!

## The alternative Messiah

They brought the donkey to Jesus and spread their cloaks on it. And people made a carpet with their coats on the road, or spread palms they had cut in the fields. People running in front of the others and people running behind shouted, 'Hosannah! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on our father David's coming Kingdom! Hosannah in the highest!' (*Mark 11:7-11*)

Vocation is about 'What to Do'.

Here, the Donkey-King, Jesus, with his alternative Israel of north-country radicals, rides into the alien city of power and might. He is cheered on by his supporters – like him, provincial Galileans in the big city for the great festival. For once, the alternatives political reality of Jesus and his Kingdom is visible.

The response of the religious and political powers, incensed by Jesus' movement, and angered at his cleansing the temple, is to crucify him. Whenever political power is seriously threatened, wherever a real alternative is perceived, the political power will act with repression or violence. 'The King of the Jews' is a mockery, a sarcasm, of the Romans in power.

There are two views of how Christians should act in politics :

- i. The establishment way. In many countries, Christianity is the 'national' religion. The church is a 'chaplain' to society. Christianity therefore supports responsible, conscientious people inside the system to help run its politics.
- ii. The alternative way. Christianity is not the 'national' religion, but one among many optional life-views. The church is then 'prophetic' in society. Christianity therefore supports committed, alternative people who set up political parables alongside society.

### To do

Find out who is poor in your area, and how they live – and why.

### To study

Read up some stories of small prophetic groups and describe how they have helped change the whole of society. (For example: Anti-Slavery Society, Suffragettes, Black Power, Eco-Warriors, Social Forum.)

### To discuss

How could your group operate in politics? Or how could you in the future?

# Note on resources

The approach of these studies does not depend upon any single interpretative method. Almost any commentary on Mark would be useful to provide interesting insights into the passages used.

Two publications by the present writer have recently argued for a 'Practice Interpretation' of Mark. A Practice Interpretation seeks to establish how far the records indicate the actions and vocations of Jesus' disciples, of Mark's fellow believers, and of Mark's intended hearers. The books are :

- *Outworkings: Gospel Practice and Interpretation* by John Vincent (Urban Theology Unit, 2005), price £3.00
- *Mark: Gospel of Action – Personal and Community Responses* edited by John Vincent (SPCK, 2006), price £14.99

For a book on Jesus and his disciples in Mark, related to contemporary studies, you might care to see :

- *Radical Jesus: The Way of Jesus Then and Now* by John Vincent (Ashram Press, 2004), price £7.50

For a follow-up to the present course, you might look into :

- *Journey: Explorations into Discipleship, a 12-part programme for groups*, price £12.00 for four-volume set (available from Ashram Press, 178 Abbeyfield Road, Sheffield S4 7AY)