

JESUS HEALS A MAN WITH LEPROSY

MARK 1:40-45

Meeting Jesus in the Gospels

OPENING PRAYER

Living God, We acknowledge your holy presence here and in the world around us. As we meditate on the mysteries of your word in Scripture, may we be transformed by your Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

EXEGESIS

This passage has generated a huge debate among biblical interpreters. Is Jesus moved with pity or anger for the leper? A handful of manuscripts record Jesus' motivation for healing being anger. The rest say that Jesus was moved by compassion. The controversy doesn't stop there, because some scholars believe that the 'anger' reading came first and was later changed by Christian copyists who couldn't cope with Jesus' anger. Bart D. Ehrman argues that "Mark described Jesus as angry and . . . scribes took offense." However, the main editions of the Greek New Testament stick with 'compassion'. Several commentators accept 'anger' and interpret accordingly. Morna Hooker writes that Jesus may express anger at Satan, who is the cause of the evil which causes suffering in the world (conflict with Satan in Mark see e.g., 1:13; 8:33). Ched Myers argues that the leper had already been to the priestly authorities and been rejected by them. Hence the leper effectively tells Jesus: "you could declare me clean [according to the Law], if only you dare"! Jesus, angry at the system of injustice which had rejected the leper, declares the leper clean in the face of that system and returns the leper to the priests "as a witness against them" (1:44).

According to these readings, Jesus expresses the anger of God at human sin and injustice, which is a feature of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Exodus 32:13; Jeremiah 4:26). Anger is not missing from the portrait of Jesus offered in the Gospels. For example, Jesus regards those in the Synagogue with incredulous anger (Mark 3:5) before healing the man with a withered hand. This suggests that Hooker, Myers and others may be onto something when they suggest that anger at unjust systems, situations and behaviour was part of Jesus' personality and ministry. If Christian copyists did, as Ehrman argues, change the text of Mark 1:41 to suit later theological views, they did so inefficiently, leaving many other stories intact. The Church Fathers grappled as much with the notion of Jesus' anger as we might. St. Augustine (345-340 A.D.) wrote that "these events show that just as Jesus had a human body, he had a human soul. We read about the diversity of his feelings in the reports of the Evangelists: Jesus was astonished, was angered, was grieved, was elated . . . He was hungry, he slept, he was tired from his journey." For Augustine and for many others it is vital that we worship the God who can become fully incarnate into the whole reality of human life, anger and all.

REFLECTION

The anger of Jesus may threaten our comfortable views of him. This is the Jesus who cannot be domesticated, nor can he be easily dismissed to a 'spiritual' realm. Jesus was engaged in the public life of his society and he was angry at the systems of sin and oppression which harmed people. He reflects the righteous indignation of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of the prophets. The Gospel writers and many interpreters, ancient and modern, perceive that this anger is an outworking of compassion.

We cannot embrace our own anger as if it belonged to God, yet neither can we turn away from anger altogether. As we are transformed by the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Christ, we might come to see glimpses of the world as seen by God. We pray that God's anger at injustice, and the will to act, may become ours by grace. God's love saturates our world. Seen in this light, the struggle for justice and truth are integral to the faith which has the incarnation at its centre.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which reading- 'anger' or 'compassion'- appeals to you most, and why? Does either version challenge or comfort you?
2. How do we apprehend Jesus; in prayer, in public worship, in our own imaginations? When is there a conflict between our image of Jesus and reality?
3. What place does anger have in Christian life? Can our anger serve God?
4. Can Jesus be misrepresented by harmful images? Can God?

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- B.D. Ehrman, "A Leper in the Hands of an Angry Jesus" in Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- M. Hooker, The Message of Mark. London: Epworth, 1983.
- C. Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Orbis, 2008.
- T.C. Oden and C.A. Hall, Mark. [Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: NT II] IVP: 1998.

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