

Vocation in Mark's Gospel: The Passion Predictions

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Many churches are claiming that there is a crisis of vocation in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Fewer people are offering themselves for the ordained ministry while those that do respond to a call are often in the older age bracket seeing ministry as a second career option. Some see this as an inevitable consequence of declining church membership figures, a crisis amongst current clergy in terms of burn-out and a loss of confidence in the institutional structures, or the irrelevance of current forms of ministry for the 21st century. It needs to be recognised that this crisis is not as evident in Pacific Island communities.

At the same time new models of ministry are being explored such as Local Shared Ministry in its various denominational forms, the renewal of the permanent diaconate in some of our churches and various forms of lay ministry.

In response to this so-called “crisis” there is a renewed interest in the meaning of vocation in today’s world. I have just finished reading Karen Armstrong’s biographical account of her time in a Roman Catholic order of sisters during the 1960s, *Through the Narrow Gate*. It is clear that her experience reflects pre-Vatican II thought and formation but nevertheless the outcome was one of violence to herself resulting in deep depression recounted in the sequel *The Spiral Staircase*.

For William Willimon, an American United Methodist Bishop [and past professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University], the great danger is

“not that we might ‘burn out,’ to use a metaphor that is popular in our time, not that we might lose the energy required to do ministry. Our danger is that we might ‘black out,’ that is lose consciousness of why we are here and who we are called to be for Christ and his church.”¹

For Willimon a sense of calling is vital to the exercise of Christian ministry because the measurement of effectiveness in ministry is so problematic and the “rewards” are often

¹ William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 21.

elusive. If the churches are to regain an understanding of vocation in a very counter-cultural society then it is imperative that discernment of the call of God in the midst of human life becomes a priority.

I am left with questions, then, about the nature of discernment of the call of God in any human life. Is it so difficult to distinguish between the lure of lofty ideals, the pressure of religious expectations, the persuasive power of role models or the tyranny of the 'ought' that 21st century Christians are now unable to discern the call of God? Have we lost the art of discernment or the language to express it? Do we know any longer how to listen to the call of God? Does living in our global western culture so deprive our senses of any spiritual awareness that we can no longer recognise the call of God?

Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer and teacher, warns against an understanding of vocation that seeks only to imitate role models or live up to high ideals. He sees this as living someone else's life rather than one's own. He had his own heroes, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day and set out to live by their demanding standards.

"The results," he writes, "were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self – as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a 'noble' way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart."²

For Palmer, living life by someone else's definitions, or according to unrealistic ideals and standards is a recipe for disaster and often personal damage, as we saw with Karen Armstrong's early experience. He sees as crucial to our understanding of vocation that we *listen* to our life and try to understand what it is telling us rather than trying to make our life into something it can never truly be. "Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear."³

I want now to explore how Mark's understanding of vocation can assist us in this process of discernment, of listening for the call of God within our own lives. I will look briefly at

² Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

the traditional call narratives at the beginning of the gospel but will focus more intensely on the three passion predictions at the centre of Mark's gospel which I have found to be surprisingly fruitful.

In the opening chapter of Mark's gospel words associated with vocation such as "call," *kalew* "voice" *fwnh* and "crying" *boaw* and *fwnew* occur six times. In addition words such as "messenger," *ajggelo* "proclaiming" *khrussw*, "follow" *deu/te ovpi,sw ajkolouqew avph/lqon ovpisw*, and "good news" *euvaggevlion* which are linked with the vocation of discipleship, occur no less than seven times. This chapter is clearly dominated by actions associated with vocation: the communication of the good news of Jesus, and call and response to that good news.

Throughout Mark's gospel the key verbs of "hearing" and "seeing" have more than literal meaning. They take on the metaphorical sense of responding to the call to follow Jesus in a way that shows insight and understanding of what the call to discipleship will mean. Those who are blind or fearful are shown to be lacking in both faith and understanding. (Refs). So at the baptism of Jesus (1:9-11) we are given a picture of Jesus, both seeing and hearing. (Note not those around him but Jesus alone has this experience.) He sees the Spirit descending upon him like a dove and he hears a voice from heaven confirming his calling: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus both sees and hears clearly, unlike the disciples who as we shall see later have difficulty in understanding their call and its implications.

The metaphor of blindness/deafness expressing lack of understanding is taken up at 4:10-12 where Jesus explains that while the disciples receive inside knowledge about the mystery of the kingdom of God, outsiders receive only parables "so that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen but not understand." This line of thinking is continued within the gospel as the disciples bumble along, failing to understand Jesus' miracles especially the feedings of the five and four thousand. In exasperation at 8:17 Jesus reproaches the disciples: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still

not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? (compare Wesleyan thought) Do you have eyes, and fail to see? So you have ears, and fail to hear?"

As we approach the climax of the gospel we find the three passion predictions are framed by two healing miracles – the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). The first story is portrayed as a two-step progression of partial healing “I can see people but they look like trees, walking,” followed by a full restoration of sight – “he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.” In the second story the language of blindness and call are closely mingled together. At first it is Bartimaeus shouting out to Jesus “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” He is undeterred by people ordering him to be quiet and repeats his cry. It is Jesus who stands still and says “Call (fwnew throughout) him here. And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” Tellingly when his sight is restored, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way.

In analyzing the three passion predictions I want to take up the structural work of Vernon Robbins.⁴ He sees a three-step progression in each prediction which culminates with a call to discipleship. Conventionally the call to follow Jesus is seen as the *first* step in discipleship but I want to argue that Mark invites us to see vocation, the call of God to each person, as a response, as the endpoint of a process which involves listening, interaction and at times silence in the midst of the journey of life. In each case the call has been clarified through hearing and listening as metaphors for understanding and through seeing and looking as metaphors for insight. One cannot make a genuine response to a call from God if one has no clarity as to the nature of the call or how to recognize it.

There are common features to each passion prediction which Robbins identifies as three steps. The first includes the location of Jesus as constantly on the move from place to place, generally recognized as the journey metaphor which in this central part of the gospel moves inexorably from Caesarea Philippi in the far north to Jerusalem, and the

⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, "Summons and Outline in Mark: The Three-Step Progression," *Novum Testamentum* XXIII, no. 2 (1981).

final vocation of Jesus – the cross. Alongside this constant movement is the clear statement that the disciples are with Jesus. The second step features interaction between Jesus and his disciples usually involving question and answer, dialogue and often rebuke. Finally comes the call to discipleship with specific teaching about the implications and cost of such discipleship.⁵

Robbins traces this pattern right through the gospel including the call of the disciples in chapters one, three and six but we will limit ourselves to the exploration of the three passion predictions which I find are the most fruitful passages in terms of our themes of discernment and vocation.

In the first passion prediction at 8:27-9:1 we find Jesus moving on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. “On the way” may be seen as a metaphor for following Jesus as used by early Christians in Acts 9:2 and 19:23. For our purposes the phrase may signify that encounter with Jesus occurs in the midst of life, while we are on our way which may in fact turn out to be “the way of the Lord” as signaled at the beginning of the gospel at 1:3. Such encounter is part of an ongoing process of call and discernment.

The interaction is initiated by Jesus’ question concerning his reputation and reception, “Who do people say that I am?” Various opinions are offered but Jesus presses the disciples for their opinion by using the emphatic “you” (u`mei/j). Peter responds with the well-known declaration “You are the Christ.” But notice that there is no response from Jesus at this point. No affirmation as in Matthew’s gospel: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,” (Matt 16:17). Instead there is the command to tell no one about him.

Now this has traditionally been linked to the Messianic Secret, a well-ploughed literary feature in the field of Mark’s gospel. I want to suggest that in the light of our concerns about the nature of vocation this command to be silent picks up two implications. The first is traditionally associated with the Messianic Secret and concerns the time of Jesus

⁵ Ibid.: 103.

and perhaps of Mark: that lack of understanding of the true nature of Jesus' messiahship precludes the possibility of having a clear understanding of what it will mean to be his disciple and hence of one's vocation, therefore the command not to discuss who Jesus is until after the resurrection (9:9). For the current reader this implies that a clear understanding of the realities involved in following Jesus need to be addressed before a response is made. The second implication concerns the role of silence alongside discussion and dialogue. Both are integral to the process of discernment. It seems to me that Jesus enjoins silence when there is the greatest probability of misunderstanding or failure to grasp the true implications of discipleship.

As if to counter the possibility of such misunderstanding, Jesus begins to teach his disciples with specific details about the suffering, rejection, death and resurrection which must come to him, identifying himself as the Son of man. At this point the interaction becomes more intense as Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Then there is a strange response from Jesus. We are told that Jesus "turning and *looking* at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."" There's a lot of rebuking going on! For it is the same word *επιτιμαω* that is used here as at verse 30 commanding the disciples to be silent and tell no one about him. But it is the act of *seeing* or *looking* that interests me and not just at Peter. It is as if Peter is representative of the disciples at this point. What does Jesus see as he looks at them? That they are mistaken in thinking that this could not happen to the Messiah? Remembering that sight is used metaphorically in Mark's gospel for insight, it suggests that Jesus sees very clearly what is going on – he is a model for discernment and his words support this. The disciples see only with human eyes or insight rather than with God's eyes. Their understanding of his messiahship is only partial and therefore their understanding of what it will mean to follow him is flawed also.

At this point we come to the climax of the passion prediction, according to Robbins' structure: the summons to discipleship. In order to counter the misunderstanding of the disciples and their lack of insight, Jesus spells out the implications of his call to

discipleship. In each passion prediction there is an unmistakable act of calling. Here the verb *proskalevomai* is used indicating an invitation or call to oneself. It is also interesting to note that the call is not just to the disciples but to the whole crowd around Jesus with the disciples. The corrective teaching is addressed very generally "If anyone wishes to follow me... whoever wants to save their life.." So by implication the call to discipleship is extended to all. The cost of such discipleship closely follows the predicted fate of Jesus himself and would-be followers can expect to share his sufferings. The specific areas concern one's true self, one's possessions and one's reputation.

Bibliography

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Mark 1:20 Immediately he **called** them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 2:17 When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to **call** not the righteous but sinners."

Mark 3:13 He went up the mountain and **called** to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him.

Mark 3:23 And he **called** them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

Mark 3:31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and **called** him.

Mark 1:3 the **voice** of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

Mark 1:11 And a **voice** came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud **voice**, came out of him.

Mark 15:37 Then Jesus gave a loud **cry** and breathed his last.

Mark 1:3 the voice of one **crying** out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

Mark 1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and **crying** with a loud voice, came out of him.

Mark 1:2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my **messenger** ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

Mark 1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, **proclaiming** a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, **proclaiming** the good news of God,

Mark 1:39 And he went throughout Galilee, **proclaiming** the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Mark 1:17 And Jesus said to them, "**Follow** me and I will make you fish for people."

Mark 2:14 As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "**Follow** me." And he got up and followed him.

Mark 1:18 And immediately they left their nets and **followed** him.

Mark 1:20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 2:14 As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

Mark 2:15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples-- for there were many who followed him.

Mark 3:7 Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him;