

Mark 12: 13-17 Confronting Violence: What does Ceasar Get?

Mark backstory, some of this you already know, and I won't repeat it each week of this sermon series.

Mark's gospel tells of the ministry of Jesus from his baptism by John the Baptist to his death and burial and the discovery of the empty tomb – but there are a few things missing from this gospel that are of note: there is no genealogy of Jesus or birth narrative, nor, in the original ending at chapter 16, any post-resurrection appearances. It portrays Jesus as a heroic man of action, an exorcist, a healer, a conflict resolver and a miracle worker. Jesus is also the Son of God, but here in Mark's version, he keeps his identity secret, concealing it in parables so that even the disciples fail to understand. Scholarship is not certain this, Messianic secret wasn't put in by the writers as a story telling device decades after the facts – we shall all just be in the wondering about that point. Yet, all these accounts are in keeping with prophecy, which foretold the fate of the messiah as suffering servant. The gospel ends, in its original version, with the discovery of the empty tomb, a promise to meet again in Galilee, and an unheeded instruction to spread the good news of the resurrection. Mark is also the first gospel written, believed to be penned between 30-49 years after the resurrection of Christ.

The other fine point is authorship – until fairly recently it has been generally agreed that Mark, also known as John Mark, from Acts 17, was a disciple of Peter – so not a disciple that walked around with Jesus. These would be Peter's accounts, through the voice of a scribe, John Mark.

*How and why this gospel, the telling of the good news of Jesus Christ is different than the other three – Matthew, Luke and John, is real. This telling of the stories tend to be lacking overt emotion, there is a non-romantic sense of them. If we look through the lens of oppression by empire, we can get an aroma of the sheer graciousness and peace that Jesus maintained in this life – against the backdrop of a violent, overwhelming culture that all the Judeans lived through. How did he face all that humiliating violence – right up to the torturous cross death? Confronting violence is something we tend to shy away from – it is intimidating, and those who bring the violence rather count on that fact. I’m hoping that we will be able to more fully recognize who and whose we are, there for a chance to know how to confront a violent world – because it was not confined to first century Palestine.*

*Violence in nature: Terrence Friethem, Hebrew scripture, Emeritis, Luther seminary*

Many people rightfully claim that such events are at least in part due to human activities that have disrupted the earth's ecosystem. They point to the depletion of the ozone layer; global warming; and weather patterns that seem increasingly violent. At the same time, disasters have long been a part of the world's life, including the extinction of species (over 90 percent of all species).

Did God create this kind of world in the first place? Does God's "good" creation include natural disasters? From "the beginning," God's creation was characterized by wildness, randomness, and risks (think water and

the law of gravity!). God created a dangerous world! Indeed, most agree that events such as earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, destructive weather patterns, cell mutations, and deadly viruses were part of creation before human beings showed up.

Such natural events seem to be God-designed for a pre-human, pre-sin world. When human beings emerged, God told them to “subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28), which must mean that, for all its goodness, God’s creation was not tranquil and perfect.

In today’s world, a distinction would have to be made between moral order events such as 9/11 (where human sin was a key factor) and cosmic order events such as, say, the tsunamis. But not an absolute distinction! Given the spider web of a world in which we live, every creaturely move affects every other creature, for good or for ill. Human sin intensifies the negative effects of some natural events. Think of Katrina, from the perspective of inadequate human preparations and responses and the possible effects of global warming on the storm’s severity. And, social inequities were revealed as the poor and the needy experienced these events at a much more catastrophic level! If moral order and natural order are so linked in some disasters, it is difficult to deny an interpretation of them in terms of God’s judgment, if one defines judgment as the consequences of sin.

And so in considering God’s participation in natural disasters, we cannot get God off the hook -- from at least two perspectives:

1. Natural disasters are an integral part of God’s creational design.

2. Specific natural events may be intensified by human sin, in connection with which one can speak of divine judgment. In either case, God cannot be removed from some kind of complicity.

While many Christian interpreters assume this is personal, not political, that the gospel writer intended to explore only religious truths, Horsley shows that the story reveals far more than that. The Israelite people suffered enormously at the hands of the Roman legions. Their homes had been burned; their families slaughtered or taken into slavery. The “legion” story was about Israel’s salvation, about the victory of good over evil, of the people over the oppressors.

Mark... Give to Ceasar what is Ceasar’s... .12:13-16

Finally, God aims at healing the environment and makes promises regarding the future of our world: the wolf will dwell with the lamb and waters shall break forth in the wilderness (see [Isaiah 11:1-9](#); [35:1-10](#)).

Note that, while Jesus stilled a storm, he didn’t remove all storms from the life of the world; while Jesus cured individuals of diseases, he didn’t rid the world of those diseases. To use the Gospel of John’s “sign” language:

Jesus’ actions gave signs of a different future that God has in store for the natural world.

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” I wondered if they had heard only the part about having a great name, but had missed the part about being the one through whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed. It happened to be the Democratic candidates for president, but I wondered if all the candidates of all the races in all the world heard that same call, and actually heeded it, how different the world might be. When God blesses us with anything, whether it is wealth, or leadership ability, or healing ability, or music ability, or nurturing ability, or anything other talent, it is so that we can bless others, not for our own personal satisfaction. We are each blessed to be a blessing—that is how we love our neighbors. This isn’t about heaven or hell, this is about making each moment of our lives and that of others, right here and right now, a little better.

You have probably heard the story from World War II of a group of American soldiers who lost their buddy in battle. They carried his body to the only cemetery in the area, which happened to be Catholic. When the priest was told that the dead man was not Catholic he said, "I am sorry, but he cannot be buried here"

The disheartened and discouraged soldiers decided to do what they thought was next best, and during the night they buried their comrade just outside the cemetery fence. They returned the next morning to pay their last respects, but they could not find a grave outside the fence.

When they told the priest of their quandary, he said, "The first part of the night I stayed awake sorry for what I told you. And the second part of the night I spent moving the fence." (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, (c) Moody Press and John MacArthur, Jr., 1983-2002.) Any fence, any barrier, anywhere is not part of God's vision of abundant life for us, no matter what border we want to convince ourselves needs on.

Is there a scapegoat, do we need to blame someone for all the ills? Is there really so clear a line between good and evil, or, does it matter where the border, the fence itself, actually stands? And, can it be moved? There is this amazing moment where the priest reimagined the kingdom of God – who is included and who is not. I think the priest became a blessing, not because of his title particularly, but because he has the courage to face the institution, the empire if you will – and that was one of his gifts. He got up and did what was good he could, when it mattered so very much in that moment. He did not change the world with the outcome of the war, he did not reinvent the bible or face down a demon possessed person – he got up, to move the fence. Everybody in. No reason to actually fight.

This week, consider the ways you have been blessed in your life. How are you using those gifts to be a blessing to others? Is there a fence to be moved? How has this church been blessed? Do our doors open wide enough? How can we use our blessings in even more ways to bless the world? As long as our hearts are beating, as long as our doors are open, we are called by the blessings of God to bless the world. Praise be to God, Amen