

4 The Synagogues of Galilee

The devil had put to Jesus a hypothetical suggestion: “If you are the Son of God ...” Jesus, in answer, did not attempt to assert or defend a claim. He did not reply “I am the Messiah.” He did not make a claim to be anything. Jesus’ reply was to reject all the devil’s assumptions about what it would mean to be the Messiah, and his obsession with demonstrating or exploiting the fact.

Jesus did not say then “I am the Messiah.” Nor did he make it his slogan afterwards. In the gospel written by Mark (and indeed in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but especially so in Mark’s) it is clear that there was no public declaration naming Jesus as the Messiah, and at first no private claim. He did not recruit his followers under that title, but announced the imminent coming of God’s rule. They followed him because he attracted them, because his life spoke of the kingdom of God that every one of them longed for, because they found the authority of his words irresistible.

But the question of the Messiah remained a question – among other questions as to how the hopes of Israel might soon be realised. The wonderful story told by Luke and the application of the prophecies from Israel’s history are retrospective. They came to the attention of Jesus’ followers only after they had experienced the reality of the adult Jesus, a man, a rabbi (teacher), a prophet who had been among them and worked among them, till he was put to death by the authorities; who had risen from the dead, and was with them still beyond all death. Out of all this experience they learned to understand the stories and the prophecies and to discover a meaning in “Messiah” that Jesus had fulfilled. But in the beginning they had only him, to follow and to find out...

I am sure that Jesus’ own self-awareness was a matter of gradual discovery, the way that any human being gradually discovers the reality that is themselves. To imagine that Jesus was filled from the outset with a divine omniscience about himself and his role would be to deny that he was human. It would be, theologically speaking, a “docetist” view: that Jesus the human being did not really exist and that he was only an appearance of God in a human form. Jesus was a man answering the call of God, and like any person doing so, he would discover more and more about himself and his role as he responded and set about the task God had given him.

Each of the gospels tells the story of Jesus in its own way. Mark was the first, telling of his public life and his death in a direct, succinct and powerful narrative: the teaching and the doing of Jesus, his friendships, and the conflicts which led to his death. Mark’s is the most theological of the gospels, for it seizes and exposes its theology right where theology really happens: in the events themselves.

Matthew and Luke used Mark’s story, recognising its power and its message but reflecting on it, or commenting on it at greater length. Matthew, I find, is an architect at heart, laying out his themes like blocks and colonnades of stone so arranged that the whole gospel presents the symmetries and statement of a monumental building. Luke, on the other hand, is a poet and passionate story teller, well able to retell without ever getting wordy the many, many stories of God, of life, of people, that carried the teaching of Jesus.

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These are the three gospels on which I draw for this book. (They are called the “synoptic” gospels, which means that they all look at the story of Jesus in a similar way.) Each of them states quite clearly at the outset that they are presenting Jesus the Messiah, even tho, as I said above, they recognise that in his public life and teaching he did not come forward with this as a claim, but rather lived, and taught his people about, the kingdom the Messiah would rule, the kingdom of God.

Now in learning from the gospels I believe it is very important to let each gospel speak for itself without interference from the others. I think we lose a lot when we mix verses from different sources so that they cut across each other and break the thred of each story. Each gospel writer is inspired of God, to tell the story in his own way, with his own approach and talent; and to appreciate that, to hear them out at least for a distinct part of their story, is the right way to receive what they have to tell us, and to begin a real journey of understanding.

For that reason, in each chapter of this book I stick to one of the “synoptic” writers, Mark, Matthew or Luke, allowing that one to speak and, I hope, discovering why God entrusted the story to them, in their way. We opened with Luke, and then, after a chapter drawing on texts from the Old Testament, heard from Matthew. Now we come to their theological leader, Mark, in whose account, as I said, the theology is all in the story.

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After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. He was telling people, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1: 14 – 15)

When Jesus came to Galilee, this was his message “in a nutshell”. Like John, he urged the people to change (to repent), only now it was no longer a matter of being baptised as a sign: it was a matter of believing the very news that Jesus was bringing. The rule of God now beginning calls for a believing response. It should be clear right away that the kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke was not heven or any place to be reached only after death. It was coming. And it was soon to be here. To imagine that the kingdom of God comes only at the end of time, would be to imagine that Jesus was quite mistaken about its imminent arrival. The kingdom of God would be a profoundly spiritual, social, political fulfilment of the rule of God, which had always claimed the whole of Israel’s life. It was to return to the order envisaged from the beginning, all Israel alive in her relationship with God, that they were called to repent.

And they were to believe, because the rule of God was a relationship, the gift of God’s own presence and bond with his people, and a relationship is always a matter of trust. The rule of God would only be, it would only take hold and triumph where it was welcomed in joyful trust. The rule of God would not be established by forcing a population to conform to edicts, as the rule of Rome had been established by the legions. It would be found where the people welcomed it as their liberation and their hope, where they trusted God who came to rule, and believed.

Jesus gathered disciples (Simon was one of them, and James and John the sons of Zebedee the fisherman, and Levi the tax collector). Some of them were from

Capernaum by the lake of Galilee, a busy regional town and centre for the fishing industry. It would appear that Jesus had left Nazareth to settle there, regularly joining in the “synagogue” or town assembly and there speaking about the coming kingdom of God. His words impressed people for their authority. The normal way of teachers, and of the scribes, who made a profession of the written word, was to quote the scriptures and the great authorities of the past, presenting their knowledge of these as the ground of their teaching. But Jesus had a direct, compelling way of speaking, as if what he said came with its own authority, his authority, which did not need to be referred back, but was there with them now to be questioned, tested, accepted and followed.

And there was another kind of authority about him: a power over evil forces that were wreaking havoc in some people’s bodies and minds. There were disturbed or insane people whose reaction to him was noisy and violent. They shouted out as if possessed by demons. It seemed that the forces of evil which seized upon the weak and vulnerable, abusing and exploiting them, recognised in Jesus an opponent who seriously challenged their power. They had an idea of who he was.

In the synagogue at Capernaum there was a man possessed, who shouted out: “What’s your business with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: God’s holy one.”¹ Jesus rebuked the spirit: “Be quiet and come out of him.” It threw the man into a fit and rushed out of him with a scream. It had no option but to obey, and the people were astonished at such authority: “The way he speaks! And even the spirits have to obey him!” There was something new and powerful about his teaching, and soon they were talking about him all over Galilee.

We have problems about these “evil spirits” and the notion of “possession”. It would appear that many afflictions for which we can now give a physical or chemical cause (such as epilepsy) were attributed to possession by demons. It also seems that those who were severely emotionally or mentally disturbed, whether from illness, or their own behaviour, or mistreatment and trauma in childhood, were considered possessed, especially if their behaviour was bizarre, disabling or self-destructive.

Two things are clear. One is that, whatever else he thought, Jesus shared the view of his time that here was an evil he could address as a conscious being and command its submission. The second is that this confrontation with evil is on a par, for Jesus, with his healing of broken bodies and other illnesses. It is something he does, simply and immediately, as an exercise of his authority. He cannot be resisted or thwarted. Wherever people bring to him disease and psychological dysfunction, these are not a serious challenge to him. He is in no doubt that the wish of God is to heal and to liberate, and that is what he does.

This victory over the demons was more than some “supernatural” exercise. The sense of possession by evil, of helplessness in the hands of cruel and destructive forces, paralleled and echoed the political experience of many in Galilee. There, oppression was not just an idea but an horrific reality. The province had seen a number of hopeless revolts against Roman occupation, all of which had been put down with brutal cruelty: torture, execution and slavery. Unsettled and disturbed as they were

¹ Mark 1: 24

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under Roman rule, the people of Galilee had been forced to submit and obey other wills than their own. It was not unlike being controlled by terrible demons.

People would have felt the comparison. To be set free from demon oppression or to see people around you liberated would have enabled you to experience the kind of release and hope denied you under political and military control of the country. Liberation, freedom for the heart and for the community had been Israel's first experience of God; it was now, in this way, their first experience of God's kingdom declared by Jesus.

Jesus' healing, like his teaching, had a tremendous effect on people. After he had cured the raving man in the synagogue, and as soon as the sun had set and the Sabbath was over, the whole town of Capernaum came crowding around his door. They no longer waited for him to turn up in the assembly. They brought their sick and possessed, and he healed them. Clearly, he had a successful healing ministry ahead of him. He might have gone on that way for a long time, doing a great deal of good, but it was not enough. When morning broke and people were again lining up for more of his wonderful ministry, he had gone missing. The disciples went looking and found him in a deserted place out of town where he had been praying, and urged him to come back: "Everyone is looking for you!"

But Jesus had come for more than a healing ministry, and those who think the gospel in our day is all about "Christ healing now" have not read the record of the gospels carefully enough. It is good that the churches have rediscovered the gift of healing, and it is good that some have and exercise this gift abundantly, but we should not make the mistake of thinking that this is what the gospel is about. Such healing was not the message of Jesus. It was not the focus of his message. His news was the kingdom of God: the rule of God over the villages and towns of Israel and over the hearts of their people. In the love and compassion of God there is indeed healing for the sick, and wherever they reach out to God, God responds; but there is much more than illness and demon possession to be healed. Jesus was announcing a time of change and restoration for the whole community and for a whole society; for the kingdom of God could mean nothing less, and vividly though the demons might represent the rule of evil, the rule of God challenges more than the demons.

Jesus had a message to give. Far from advertising his healing powers as an invitation to followers, he increasingly tried to keep that side of things quiet. He could never refuse healing, but it did get in the way of his complete work. When the disciples found him that morning, he had been praying. He had been for some time speaking with and listening to God. And he knew what he had to do. It was not to go back to the crowd in Capernaum, to be their marvellous healer, but to go out to the towns and villages of Galilee, to speak of the kingdom of God in their meetings too ...

When we read of Jesus going round the "synagogues" we shouldn't imagine buildings, like a modern synagogue. Only the larger towns like Capernaum with money to call upon had special buildings for the synagogue to meet in, for the "synagogue" was the assembly, the town or village community gathered for whatever purpose, for discussion, decision, worship. They would not have separated religious from other community concerns, the economics and politics of local self-

management, for everything was under the one law of God, the rule for all society to which they could all appeal.

If we imagine something like church worship, we've probably got it wrong. Worship there was, of course, in the sabbath meetings, but the to and fro of discussion, the argument, the people pressing forward with their needs – these things that we read about in Mark's gospel are the doings of a town or village meeting, not of an orderly religious service. When the people came together, to worship or to discuss, they did not have a special, separate place for "religion"- the synagogue was the place for all their community concerns.

And when they appealed or referred to God's Law, that being the tradition they all shared, and in which were grounded their common values, we shouldn't imagine that they "took out their bibles" to check the references. There were no bibles. Altho the "Scriptures" carried great authority, there was no fixed definition as to which writings counted as Scripture. Some, like the Saducees in Jerusalem accepted only the five books of Moses, the Torah. Others would quote the prophets, but they would do so only from hearing and memory, for few could read and in any case only the welthier synagogues would have owned many scrolls of sacred writing. Whether people were expecting a Messiah, or the renewal of God's covenant and the law given to Israel, the gift of God's spirit or the recovery of independence, they would be drawing on what they had heard and been told, beliefs and traditions held and valued in their local communities as one instance of the beliefs held in Israel.

Jesus spoke to that belief. And his purpose was to tell them of the coming renewal of Israelite society under the rule of their God. This was his message as he travelled around the towns and villages, and everywhere there were demons to be cast out and the sick and crippled to be healed as the beginning of God's care for his people. When a leper came to him and was healed, he told the man to go and show himself to the priest, as the law required, but otherwise to tell no-one¹. But the man was too full of his story and blabbed everywhere. The effect was the first real check on Jesus' mission and the very job he had set out to do was now impossible. There were just too many people, and he could no longer go into the villages to bring the message there. He had to stay in the open country, where, even so, people came out to him in crowds.

Many a leader has been frustrated by the enthusiasm of their followers. Someone who comes with charisma and gifts that attract and inspire can easily be overwhelmed by the first success. So many people are impressed, so many come running to join the show, all with their own needs and expectations, all persuaded that here at last is the answer to their prayers and their hopes, all projecting onto the new-found leader their idea of the task to be done and their vision for his role. The one who makes a hit in what is only one dimension of their aims may be, forever after, confined frustratingly to that one dimension by an enthusiastic following that does not want to know about the rest.

Jesus was hindered by the crowds who came to him for healing, yet he did want to heal them. He could not reject them, tho he would often avoid them. Eventually, he

¹ Mark 1: 40ff

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came back to Capernaum, and there he found a way to show how his mission was more than the healing of broken bodies. He was teaching people in his own house (or perhaps it was Simon's) and the house was crammed full of eager listeners so that you couldn't even get to the door¹. There were many people here who wanted to hear about the kingdom of God; but outside there were others who thought it should all be interrupted and the teaching suspended for Jesus to attend to a sick man. Four men brought their friend to him on a stretcher. He was paralysed, and for them, now, the kingdom of God meant Jesus healing him. Nothing should get in the way. When they found the doorway blocked, they hauled him up onto the roof and there began to break away the light material until they had made a hole over the place where Jesus was. Then they lowered the man, stretcher and all, down in front of him.

If ever the best laid plans were circumvented! There are a number of incidents in the gospels where we see that Jesus was learning about his mission, learning how to go forward into the work of God, by responding to events, and especially to the unexpected faith of the people who confronted him, even when they frustrated his intentions. Clearly here were people who believed in him, and whatever he had intended before the roof was broken open, he now had to respond to them. But his response would show more of his meaning than a simple healing.

He said to the paralysed man: "Your sins are forgiven."

It was an ambivalent response, endorsing an ambivalent attitude to illness. For their society was ambivalent towards illness. On the one hand there was the generous impulse of human sympathy: here the friends or servants who were ready to go to great lengths to help the paralytic. On the other hand there was the belief that sickness and misfortune were punishment for sins. Till now, Jesus had not spoken of sin to those who came for healing, but now he confronted the issue, not to condemn but to forgive. "Your sins are forgiven."

Now that was nothing short of scandalous. It was all very well to go about healing and throwing demons out, but to talk of forgiving sins was to encroach upon the prerogative of God. There were those among Jesus' hearers who strongly objected to this pronouncement. The scribes, as authorities on such matters, knew how far a man might go, even if he were gifted by God with extraordinary powers. They were reluctant to speak out, but they were thinking that Jesus had blasphemously exceeded the limits. Jesus knew them and he knew their thinking. They had to be challenged. The man would be healed, and at the same time Jesus would show that his healings were in fact a sign of something both deeper and more liberating: the coming of God's own power in forgiveness of sin.

So he said to them, "Why are you resisting? Which is easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Pick up your stretcher and walk out of here'?" It's ironic, of course, that the easier thing to say is the harder thing to do – the thing they think is impossible. Anyone can say 'Your sins are forgiven' for there's no way of testing whether it has really happened. (Unless there is a connection between sin and sickness ...) But if you say 'Get up and walk out of here' to a paralysed man – everyone will see whether or not you are a fraud.

¹ Mark 2: 1 – 3

What's more, if you believe (as the scribes believed) in sin as the explanation for sickness, how can you separate healing and forgiveness? Every time Jesus heals, your theology is profoundly challenged. So Jesus said to the paralysed man: "Stand up, pick up your stretcher and walk out." The man did so, and everyone was astonished. Whether they understood the point, we are not told.

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The conflict that began here was to intensify over the months that followed. The authorities, the religious and political leaders of his society, were willing to hear Jesus, but increasingly disturbed by what they heard. Watching him closely, their interest turned to hostility, and they looked for ways of dealing with him. We shouldn't imagine that either the scribes or the Pharisees were "clerics" or anything like that. Their leadership was not confined to a "religious" sphere, for their society had no separate "religious" sphere. The people who were upset with Jesus were the small-town social and political leaders of his people – the ones who traditionally laid down the law and could use the law to push their own views because they knew the law. They often held economic power as landowners and property owners, successful managers and traders, skilled professionals. They were used to getting their way, and used to defining their own class as the people of worth and authority.

Jesus, by contrast, was finding followers among some very questionable people and was to be seen eating and drinking in their company, "sinners" whose tainted contact the Pharisees in particular would carefully avoid. They felt that, as a teacher who should know better, Jesus was breaking down the essential moral and social distance between good and evil. They noticed too that he didn't encourage his disciples to fast, on those occasions when the Pharisees and the disciples of John did so. They criticised him for this, and again when he let his disciples, as they passed the cornfields, pick and eat some ears of corn altho it was the Sabbath. For the Pharisees, Sabbath-observance was the measure of acceptability to God and man, and, in their eyes, Jesus devalued it.¹

Conflict came to a crunch one Sabbath in the synagogue, when a man with a crippled hand came forward.² The authorities watched to see whether he would dare to break the Sabbath regulations right there before the whole assembly. So Jesus asked them what the law forbade on the Sabbath, the saving or the destroying of life, but they would not answer him. They preferred to let him give his own answer and put it beyond doubt where he stood as regards the law. For them, it was not a point to discuss, or an opportunity to reflect and learn; it was a hostile challenge.

It's not hard to imagine: the Sabbath assembly was an opportunity for them to sound off about what the people of the town should be doing and how they should be managing their affairs. Ordinary people were there to listen and to be instructed. And here was Jesus allowing them to intrude their own petty agendas, pushing forward their own needs in the most irritating way, when there were more important issues to attend to. Not that the leaders could openly object to people bringing up their concerns – that's what a meeting is for – but they could make an issue of their asking

¹ Mark 2: 27 ² Mark 3: 1 – 6

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Jesus to work on the Sabbath, and healing crippled hands was surely work. They could object to that.

Those who enjoyed the responsibility and the privilege of leading in society, the respect and the status it earned them, jealously guarded their position. They had their stake in a system that put a premium on knowledge and made the values of society dependent on the ability to master the intricacies of interpretation. It was this that put them, the scribes as scholars and lawyers and the Pharisees as exemplary practitioners, in their position of esteem, and they would defend it, with desperate measures if necessary, just as we would.

Jesus, having confronted them before the very people it was their authority to rule, did not shrink from following thru his argument, even in the Sabbath meeting. He called the man to him and healed his paralysed hand.

As it was clear to the authorities that they could not cow him, they knew now that they had to disable him. The conflict was political, and the Pharisees, looking for allies, met with the Herodians to discuss tactics, for both parties had decided that Jesus must be destroyed. The Herodians were supporters of the king, Herod, the ruler of Galilee. They were not natural allies of the Pharisees, for the Pharisees at best reluctantly endured Roman rule, and the king was Roman-appointed, backed by the Roman army. He ruled at their behest, to carry out their policies and safeguard their interests, after which he was free to pursue his own concerns, or those of his people. He had fallen foul of the law, much more seriously than Jesus, in that he had married his brother's wife, but there is no evidence that he taught his subjects to break the Sabbath.

Between the Herodians and the Pharisees, there was not much common ground, but politics is about compromise, especially when there is a fight on and a common enemy to be eliminated. Nobody minded healers and ethical teachers, but Jesus, by challenging the norms and structures of their delicately balanced society, by bending the boundaries of authority, had made himself a political enemy of Pharisees and Herodians alike. Tho each of these had their own very different ideas about society, they were prepared to act together to defend all the established contenders against someone from outside, who with all too much and all too clear authority, would challenge the very bases of the power they disputed.

If, on this matter, local Pharisees consented to mingle with Herodians, they had other more sympathetic connections – and in high places too. They mite be country-town people, but economically Galilee had its clout, and their party had its members in Jerusalem. Soon there were moves afoot to deal with Jesus from the highest levels. Mark doesn't tell us how the Jerusalem authorities got involved, whether they themselves saw a danger or whether they were invited by the local leaders, to give more weight to their side. But experts came down from Jerusalem¹ and soon reached their conclusion: Jesus was a dangerous fraud. He gained his victories over the demons by using the power of the prince of demons, Beelzebul.

¹ Mark 3: 22

Jesus ridiculed their claim that Satan's power could be enhanced by dividing his servants against themselves – but he also made his most terrible denunciation of their tactics: “All sins and blasphemies will be forgiven, but not this, to blaspheme against the Spirit of God.”

Jesus' struggle was a political one – more clearly so, now that Jerusalem was involved. Thru conflict with those who were responsible for articulating the values of society, and so for maintaining the social and political order, he had become entangled in the delicate but ruthless manoeuvres that maintained authority at the highest level. He was not political in the sense of playing their political game or lining up with any one of their parties, but they quickly recognised that what he taught and what he did threatened the maintenance of the system that they embodied. When the scribes came down from Jerusalem to investigate, the matter had become political at a national level. It could not now be more so unless the Jewish and the Roman authorities were to come together and take joint action ...

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Mark is at pains to show us that when the Messiah comes no one is ready for him or able to accept his coming. He has shown us how the crowds, and the little, ordinary people who welcomed him for his power and his personality nonetheless did not understand him and in fact, in their very enthusiasm, hindered his mission. He has shown us how the authorities, the men of influence whose judgement carried weight in society, criticised and then opposed him. And now he asks whether there was some other group that both recognised and accepted him. What about his family?

In Jesus' society every man in a prominent or vulnerable position needed family. Everything depended on your connections. You could ride out hostility and opposition if your family had clout. If they were with you, to pull strings or throw around a bit of weight, you could chance a brush even with the authorities, who might have to think carefully before taking on your whole clan. Even a man in a fairly humble position would carry weight in his local community and in the synagogue, if there was a sizeable family to back him up.

So, what about Jesus? Did he have any family backing? Mark recognises the point and tells us here that altho he did have family, they were not with him. There were a number of brothers and sisters, and his mother was around, but the family did not approve of his stepping out into such dangerous notoriety. They either thought he was mad or were worried that other people thought he was mad, and their reaction was to come and fetch him home. They decided to take him in hand and bring him back to Nazareth where they could keep an eye on him.

But Jesus had taken a decision about his family. When they arrived, he made it clear that the most important family was the one he already had around him. There was a group of followers with him at the time, listening to him, and when the family sent in word that they wanted to see him, he replied:

“Who is my mother and my brothers?” He looked at the people gathered around him and said: “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother.” (Mark 3; 33 – 35)

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What Jesus did was profoundly shocking. Right when he needs them, he takes the extraordinary step of effectively downgrading his family. And who, in a world where you are nothing without your family to give you connexions and standing, does that? This, at least, was madness. He might for the moment enjoy a popular following, but when it comes to the crunch, will any of the people stand by him as a family would?

But Jesus had not pointed to his followers because they were strong or loyal: he had in reality pointed to God. It was those who did the will of God who would be family to him. He was proclaiming a new order where the will of God was to be carried out and those who did it would find themselves together, strengthening one another like a family. Jesus was willing to trust himself into that new order of belonging.

So who was on Jesus' side? When he referred to those sitting around him in the house, he was pointing to his disciples, among them twelve whom he himself had chosen to be his closest companions and to share his work and his power. Were they his new family? Were they the ones who would support him? Are Jesus' chosen disciples to be the heroes of the kingdom of God?