

The Seminal Gospel: a personal commentary on the Gospel According to Mark

By George Kimmich Beach, October 12, 2009

[Note: This is a draft version not for quotation in other works. Included are the Foreword and commentary Mark chapters 1 and 4). The remainder of Mark is in process. Footnotes are noted by “[n.]” in the text, but have not been written out. Please note that readers are instructed to read the relevant portions of Mark before reading the commentary—unless, of course, you’ve already memorized the text. --GKB]

Foreword: Reading with both eyes

“. . . Naming God, before being an act of which I am capable, is what the texts of my predilection do when they escape from their authors, their redactional setting, and their first audience, when they deploy their world, when they poetically manifest and thereby reveal a world we might inhabit.”

Paul Ricouer, “Naming God” [n. Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry, p. 168]

Mark seems not to have known Aristotle’s principle of “the excluded middle”: something cannot be A and not-A at the same time. In his Gospel the words and deeds of Jesus seem to point to something that is *beyond* himself, yet also *include* him. Again, his words and deeds seem to point to a time that is *future*, and yet is also already *present*. Jesus often calls it “the kingdom of God,” and once, in Mark and the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke, as speaks of “the secret [Greek: *mysterion*] of the kingdom of God.” Translators seem to shy away from the obvious translation, “mystery,” perhaps to avoid the connotation of ancient mystery cults. A mystery is indeed a kind of “who-done-it,” a

story in which the identity and motives of the chief actors are hidden from view. It takes a sleuth to ferret them out. For Mark, in contrast to the other Biblical Gospels, this “kingdom” and Jesus’ role in it seems *necessarily* to be hidden. Does Jesus, the very one who announces this sacred reality, deliberately keep it out of view? So it seems, unless you happen to be one of those who have been given “eyes to see” and “ears to hear.” This is the curious kind of story we are getting into when we read and reflect on Mark’s Gospel.

The text will often lead us to reflect on the strangeness of the “God-ruling,” taking Richard R. Niebuhr’s suggested translation of *basilia thou theou*, the Greek words normally rendered “kingdom of God.” [n to p. 130, *Transforming Liberalism*] For it is not a physical place, a geographical realm, but more nearly an event, yet not as something that happened “long ago and far away” but as happening again and again. It may even happen here and now; in consequence it calls forth constant and renewed expectation.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of how the intense expectation of some new happening arose, contradicting worldly wisdom—there’s nothing new under the sun. The text of this story is set, “frozen in time,” and this text will be the object of our reflections. [n. There are, of course, differences in the surviving ancient texts, but the question of textual variants—many modern Bibles indicate these variants in footnotes to the text—will only occasionally bear upon this interpretive reading.] But our reflections on it are always contemporary, and sometimes they are intensely personal. And when they are intensely personal, when they concern the directive of our hearts and minds—that is, our spiritual being, our sense of meaning and purpose—then we may not so much reflect on it as allow it to reflect on, shed new light on, us. Paul spoke the human longing for full and

clear self-reflection in ecstatic terms: “For now we see as in a glass, darkly, but then, face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13: 12). We want not only to see but to be seen—and accepted, even loved. We want not only to love but also to be loved.

Hence the order of things in this book: *read and reflect*. When effective preachers, speaking as ministers of the Gospel, read not only the Bible but many texts, and life itself from their own, first hand observation. They observe Emerson’s demand: “Acquaint thyself at first hand with deity.” They reflect and interpret, testifying to what they have seen and heard and felt, inviting others to follow after them. “Our shamans see further than we,” say the Inuit, “otherwise we would lose all trace of the animals in the winter snows.” A revelation is a kind of insight. The book is an invitation to reading and reflection, in the expectation of insight.

Mark is called an evangelist, and he sets the pattern for evangelists coming after him. The form he creates and its content seem to be unique and unprecedented. Certainly it is a moment of astonishing creativity; its influence radiates like the widening concentric rings from a rock tossed into a pond. Although quickly vanishing, the rings seem endless; it is an image of eternity. Mark’s Gospel is called “seminal” because it is the life-encoded seed from which subsequent Gospels and their literary variants have grown. [n.]

[n. The priority of Mark to the other Gospels in the Christian Bible is generally accepted by scholars today; it follows Matthew in the New Testament because Matthew, being an “expanded edition” of Mark and “correcting” him at various points, was given highest authority by the early Christian church. The texts of both Luke and Matthew reflect a knowledge of Mark, for they draw extensively on him, but not on each other—a

judgment drawn close examination of the texts, showing that they appear unfamiliar with each other. For instance, compare Matthew's "Sermon of the Mount" to Luke's so-called "Sermon on the Plain" (Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6: 20-49) or their wholly different Nativity stories (Matthew 2 and Luke 2); and then note that all this material is missing from Mark. The Gospel of John is another matter, for John is mainly interested in providing a theological interpretation of Jesus as the Christ. By the time we reach John, usually considered the last-written of the four canonical Gospels, the "messianic secret" has disappeared from the account. This does not mean that the author of John's Gospel was ignorant of the historical or geographical facts of Jesus' life; in some particulars he may be more accurate than the synoptic Gospels. But John, too, follows the pattern established by (or reflected in) Mark in his final chapters, the narrative of the Passion, the final week of Jesus' life. (The Passion Narrative is told in Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, and John 18-20.)]

Mark's Jesus sets the pattern for ministry, a pattern that obtains still today. He does what effective preachers have always done: first you tell the story, and then you put your auditors into the story. His healings and other actions are part of his message, as much as his parables and saying are. The message: the kingdom of God is present and all-powerful, when you are fully "present," wholly given, to it. Or we can say: you inhabit it when you invite it to inhabit you. Word and act are equally forms of preaching and share in Jesus' proclamation. Although fed by deeply personal questions and convictions, such preaching, writing, and acting are not purely inward or private acts. They are outward and public. They are addressed to others, to whoever "has ears to hear" and follow after.

Saint Anselm famously spoke of *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding,” and this has become a classic definition of theology. Faith precedes and enables understanding, not as “the scientific method” would have it, looking for evidence and deciding what to believe on the basis of that evidence. It is the difference between “believing in” and “believing that”; authentic faith is always the former, for the object of faith can never be objectively determined. If you know something, clearly and certainly, faith is pointless. But the most important things in life are not clearly and certainly known; they are felt, sought, hoped for, believed in. Anselm, who was following in the tradition of Saint Augustine, also stated the principle in more personal terms: “I believe in order that I may understand.” [n. See Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), pp. 2-3.]

The earliest followers of Jesus expressed their faith in the form of a story, which they called “the gospel,” the good news. Mark, known entirely from the Gospel that bears his name, was the first to put the story down in writing. His use of the Greek language suggests that this was his native tongue; although literate, he was not a highly educated person. He may have been the John Mark referred to in the Book of Acts (12: 12, 15: 37), and may have written his Gospel in Rome as a summary of the preaching of Peter. Indeed, Peter is prominent in his account—but not, remarkably, in a flattering way. Scholars think that Mark’s Gospel was written near the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., somewhat more than a generation after the death of Jesus. The destruction of the Temple is remembered to this day as one of the most calamitous events in Jewish history. This may help explain the

sense of urgency and apocalyptic foreboding that pervade Mark's writing. Is he saying, in effect, "After this nothing is the same for us Jews." Christian beginnings are understandable, then, as a work of preserving and renewing the Jewish sacred tradition by transforming it.

Authors do not usually try to instruct their readers on how to use the book. But in this case one simple suggestion is in order: Read the text of Mark's Gospel segment by segment (chapter and verse numbers are noted at the start of each section) *prior* to reading my comments on the section. Understanding references to the text will be greatly abetted if the passages referred to are fresh in mind.

It was not my original intention to create a "Lenten Manual," but as I drew near the end in the process of writing this personal commentary I saw that the whole easily fell into forty segments. Some readers may want to make the reading of Mark's Gospel together with this commentary a spiritual exercise for the forty days of Lent.

Reading the Gospel of Mark first and the commentary second gives an opportunity to ask your own questions about the meaning of the text: What puzzles me about this account? Who does Mark think this Jesus is, and what do I think about him? Setting aside all the ideas about Jesus I've picked up over the years, what surprises me about this text? What fresh insights do I gain?

One of my New Testament teachers at Harvard Divinity School, Krister Stendahl, proposed reading the Gospels "with two eyes," keeping one eye on the historical meaning of the text in its original setting (*in situ*) and the other eye on what it means to us, today. In this commentary I have sought to read the text with two eyes, in this sense, and to invite readers to do likewise, reading with their own "two eyes."

A note is in order on translations. Here I make extensive use of the contemporary translation of “The Gospel According to Mark” by the noted classics scholar, Richmond Lattimore. [n. Richmond Lattimore, *The Four Gospels and the Revelation*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1962)]. The King James Version (KJV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV), the Jerusalem Bible (JB), or another literal translation will also do fine. Paraphrase versions, such as The Living Bible, intended to be “reader friendly,” are to be avoided because they often veer into interpretation, thus blurring the distinction between “the two eyes.” I like Lattimore’s translation because it is highly readable in contemporary English. The disadvantage of this publication is that the textual numbers are not set into the text but are placed at the top of each page. In this way the text is kept un-cluttered—a reader-friendly feature—but it’s harder to refer to particular points in the text.

One Mark 1: 1 Here begins the gospel

All religions give prominence to stories of beginnings and endings, the whence and the whither of our existence, of existence itself. No doubt because that’s what religion itself is mostly about. The Bible begins with Genesis; note that the word used here suggests that the world does not just *begin*—it is *generated*. And it ends with *Revelation*, also known as *Apocalypse*—a word that has taken on fantastic connotations, but simply means “uncovered.” (In dealing with religious language, often heavily freighted with the theological accumulations of centuries, I find it helpful to go back to etymologies, and to usages in ordinary or “secular” language. The dictionary can be enlightening with words we may think we know perfectly well already, such as

“mystery” and “apocalypse.”) Jesus himself spoke of “last things,” things now veiled in mystery, things ultimately to be revealed. Early in the 20th century Albert Schweitzer published his study on the quest for the historical Jesus, concluding with his own view that Jesus’ entire teaching turned on a “thoroughgoing eschatology,” a total orientation toward “last things,” or the end of the world. The book shocked liberal Christians because it did not reflect the Jesus they thought they knew, the Jesus of the Golden Rule and the Great Commandment regarding love to God and neighbor. Schweitzer concluded in a famous passage: “He comes to us as one unknown. . .” [n.] and soon thereafter, undertook preparations to become a medical missionary in Africa. His “quest for the historical Jesus” led him to transform his brilliant career in Biblical scholarship and music into a life of renunciation and humanitarian service.

As the book of Genesis tells the genesis of the world, Mark sets out to tell the genesis of the gospel. In fact his Gospel proves itself seminal. His first sentence is a fragment, apparently to be read as a title: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” As if to say: The beginning of a whole new world!

We refer to Mark’s work as *a* Gospel, one of our canonical and various other non-canonical gospels. So we might think that Mark is saying, “My telling of the good-news-story of Jesus Christ begins here.” But that would be superfluous. Rather, he is saying: *The gospel itself*, the good news of something wonderful that is happening in the world, happening even now, began in this way.

A reader might think that “the gospel” of Jesus refers to his “teachings.” While the gospel includes teachings, it is something more and different than this. The text before us is not a compilation of sayings, or sermons, or parables. It is a narrative. In

this way it is different from books like the so-called Gospel of Thomas (properly titled “The Secret Sayings of Jesus”), an ancient book of esoteric wisdom given to the apostle Thomas, or “The Jefferson Bible” (properly titled, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*), in which Thomas Jefferson extracted the teachings of Jesus that he took to be historically authentic.

The story Mark tells includes many things that Jesus said, as they were remembered or possibly written down by others. He wrote no book, himself. Or his words were freely “reconstructed”; he may not have said many things the tradition ascribed to him. We cannot be certain in virtually any instance. The text itself—with ancient variants—is what we have, and what we know to be seminal not only for other works of its type but for a vast religious and cultural stream that comes from it and all that this stream influences. It is also true, of course, that Mark draws upon a vast religious and cultural heritage, Jewish and Gentile, preceding him. His work, then, is something like the narrow waist of an hour-glass, the central place in which the past is gathered from many sources, and from which the future flows outward in many directions.

We may still wonder: Can you really bypass the question of “the historical Jesus”? Don’t we still want most of all to know about the man who “stands behind” the text? Some commentators have said that everything in the Gospels has been imagined, and there is no “historical Jesus.” That conclusion destroys their value as a religious texts, for our ability to take the story seriously turns on our sense that it reflects the words and deeds of real people, situated in a particular time and place. Mark was simply the first one, so far as we know from the evidence, who did we are now doing. We follow in his

footsteps—listening and responding, remembering and interpreting, reading and reflecting. We either have an intuitive sense about Biblical figures—not only Jesus but extending far back in the history of Israel—that these are real people in real times and places, or we don't.[n. Elie Wiesel on “fiction”] Myths, properly speaking, are stories of the Gods; Biblical history always claims to be about historical people. When Satan talks with God in the Book of Job, that is myth; when Job and his friends speak, they sound like real people. This is true however artfully the words and deeds of ancient figures have been told; the “artfulness” of the telling testifies to the sense of significance ascribed to what is being told, not that imagination has been substituted for reality.

Every word and every event in this story will not have the same ring of authenticity or meaningfulness to me or to you or to any other reader, and so will not be given the same weight in our sense of the whole. Every reader will make a selection, emphasizing this and ignoring that; This book does not pretend to “scientific objectivity,” and in any event, as Alfred North Whitehead said of the pretensions of science itself, “the exactness is a fake.”[n; see also Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*] We always make a selection, in heart and mind, and interpret the whole in that light. Paul Ricoeur calls such a selection “texts of our predilection.” Some things are luminous, for us, and we latch onto them. Other things we ignore entirely, or reject as meaningless or repugnant. This is natural and necessary, I think, for the only thing we have besides this obdurate, fixed text is ourselves and our experience of the world. We read the text against this personal background, letting it speak to us. This kind of study, carried to its conclusion, leads to theological reflection, that is, reflection on foundational religious belief: why do we believe what we believe?

Mark's story includes not only many things that Jesus said and did but also many things that others said and thought and did, responding to him. Above all it is a story of what happened to him: *the life he chose and the life that was chosen for him*. You do not have to accept this viewpoint, but you do need to see that only such a perspective makes sense of the story.

Taken from both perspectives, together, it is the story of the life to which Jesus consented. The gospel—the word comes from the Old English “God-spell,” meaning “good news”—comprises all this. It is a God-spiel, a divine story. “Consent” is a theological hinge, linking what has been given to us and what we ourselves make, or what is chosen for us and what we freely choose.

Speaking of “excellency,” a term that includes his idea of the highest good and greatest beauty, Jonathan Edwards uses a luminous phrase, “consent of being to being.”^[4] See George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edward: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 78, and Roland A Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).] Sometimes he adds a wonderful qualifier, and speaks of “cordial consent.” There may be anger in *dissent*, but not in *consent*. It must be freely given; coerced consent cannot be true consent. Edwards thought of consent as the essence of love, for love is not simply a choosing but also a being chosen, a relationship of mutuality and harmony. It is both good and beautiful. Here we do not speak of fate or destiny or predestination, but of a pattern of life in which we willingly participate, a pattern we make our own, something to which we give our cordial consent.

What kind of text is the book we call the Gospel According to Mark? It is the rare kind that leads us into reflections on such questions as these: Does Jesus we freely choose his path, up to and including his death, or is it, in the last analysis, chosen for him? Perhaps we are not so different, for we think of ourselves as free, yet know that our lives are shaped by thousands of impinging circumstances. In the case of Jesus, who chooses—his enemies or his God? If his enemies, is he still choosing his path freely? If his God is choosing his path for him, is he, once again, choosing his path freely? Finally, then, what do these most profound questions say about our own pathways in life—what we choose and what is chosen for us, and whether we can ourselves, finally, freely consent to the path before us?

Such reflections are theological in that they arise through reflection on the deepest concerns of human existence, or what Paul Tillich called our “ultimate concern.” Ultimate concerns are existential, like Hamlet’s question, “To be or not to be?” An existential question does not ask for information, but for a decision, a “yes” or a “no.” It asks for our consent or our dissent. Dissent; of course, is altogether necessary, for without that choice our consent would not be freely given! Beneath and beyond all our dissents lie our consents—those things *in the name of which*, or *for the sake of which*, we dissent—and ultimately, the consent of our being to Being Itself, which Tillich called God.[n] That Mark’s text invites such reflections is, I believe, a key to recognizing its power as a spiritual document.

Two: Mark 1. 2-8 A story embedded in sacred tradition

The story is set deep in the history of the Jewish people, echoing Isaiah's prophecy of a messenger who would come "before your face." Who is this "you"? We often think that prophets "foresee," but here Isaiah "fore-hears." He hears "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," words Mark cites from Isaiah 40: 3. "Wilderness" means a wild, uncultivated place, a desert—not as we think of wilderness, a trackless forest. Save for the coastal plains, desert encroaches everywhere in Palestine, a land so arid that you wonder anyone could call it "promised."

This is the story, then, of one who fulfills ancient prophecy of the coming of Messiah, "the anointed one," consecrated to rule as kings have been throughout history. So it is a story rooted in and drawing its sustenance and significance from sacred tradition.

Questions are gateways to inquiry and new understanding. What story do I tell with my very life? When I read this story, do I find myself in it? Is this sacred tradition my own, here and now? To read this text as a sacred writing is to reflect on ones connection to it, in spite of ones distance from it. But "in spite of" won't do: we could almost say "because of," for recognizing the strangeness of the world in which this text is embedded is a precondition of feeling its immediacy, its relation to my personal existence.

The messenger is John the Baptist, who lives by the gifts of God alone—"he ate locusts and wild honey"—and opens a pathway for one greater than himself who "is coming after me." The early Christian movement supercedes the Baptist's movement by incorporating the Baptist, giving him a supporting role. As in the Book of Exodus, the

wilderness in which “the children of Israel” wandered for forty years is a place of spiritual purity and receptivity. It is during this period that Moses receives the Decalogue, the founding charter of Judaism (see Exodus 20). Here in the wilderness Jesus will be baptized, as the Israelites were in their crossing of the River Jordan into “the promised land”—that is, the land promised to father Abraham (Genesis 12: 1), the land of the Canaanites who today we call Palestinians.

Mark says “all the people of Jerusalem” came out to be baptized by John “in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” “All the people” sounds impossibly hyperbolic. Maybe he means: “Everybody’s doing it!” “Confessing their sins” sounds formulaic. Maybe he means: casting off crooked thoughts and devious deeds by passage through steaming, drowning waters, carrying away the human stain, so that they may rise again with life-giving sunlight streaming over glistening, new-born bodies. The place and the event evoke vivid images.

There is an inchoate urge toward new life, a longing for fulfillment that does not yet know what it longs for. Not yet? It is like believing we *will* know. Or it is like faith’s ecstatic affirmation, “But then I shall know, even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13. 13) Albert Camus said that we cannot know who we are, unless another tell us. Then, of course, we must hope we are told in love!

Portentous symbolism is contained in John’s word, “I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Once I was asked what I meant by the word “spirit,” that I had used several times. I fumbled for an answer. I appealed to commonplace, secular uses: “school spirit.” That helps, but only reminds us why religious usage commonly adds the qualifier “holy”—hence Holy Spirit. But now we

come to ponder the Holy Spirit (or Ghost, which is old English for the same thing) as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. Two comments: First, I like the word of Michael Servetus: “I say that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God acting in the human being.” Second, the best explanation of “the mystery of the Holy Trinity” I know—probably not quite orthodox, if only because mysteries of the faith cannot, by definition, be explained—came from my teacher, the theologian Richard R. Niebuhr: The three members of the Trinity are called “persons” not in the sense of a physical human being but a role or *persona*. The masks worn in ancient Greek dramas represent archetypal *personas*; the Christian God has three such *personas*, the Creator, the Mediator, and the Holy Spirit.

Spirit is associated with life; Adam came alive when God breathed His Spirit, his breath of life, into a clay Adam, in Genesis 2. Spirit is also associated with the sparks that ignite fire, with fire itself and its warmth and danger. James Baldwin recalled his father’s sermon: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time.” Baldwin took the last phrase as the title of his book, warning darkly of retribution for racial injustice. Fire destroys—it also purifies and renews. Indeed, these elements are part of the same natural process—and the same moral and spiritual process. John the Baptist was a famously fiery preacher of Judgment Day and witness to “the descent of the dove” at Jesus’ baptism. Mark is calling up other images from sacred history of the Jews, as well—Noah’s flood and Elijah’s fire. A dove, released from Noah’s ark, returns with an olive branch, “after the deluge,” and Elijah’s prophetic utterance ignites the fire on Mt. Carmel in his contest with the priests of Baal.

Appreciating these symbolic references enhances our sense of Mark's story as a story replete with ancient and, indeed, humanly archetypal meanings. But finally we want to ask: what does this mean to me? Do I live with expectation and hope? Do those whom I love do so as well? And what of the strangers who come to me or only cross the paths of my consciousness? The gospel is about expectation and hope, and the transformation that carries us from here to there. To live (and be awake) is to live toward the future. To live toward the future (with faith) is to live with hope-filled expectations. To live in the face of death (and not in denial) makes this kind of awakening and this kind of believing difficult.

Three: Mark 1. 9-13 The last temptation

I like W. H. Auden's concise definition: "To choose what is difficult, all ones days, / As if it were easy. That is faith, Joseph, praise!" ["For the Time Being," n.] Such a difficulty as living without the denial of death—living toward the future is also a living toward death, of course—is met and mastered by inward and spiritual transformation.

Many things happen in one short paragraph, starting with Jesus' baptism by John. This may be an historical memory that Jesus was at first a follower of John; but to Mark's hyper-historical sensibility, it is an indicator of Jesus' mission, submerging himself in the life of his age, his people, and their shared longing for a new life and a new Israel.

Mark quickly moves on to Jesus' so-called temptation in the wilderness—"And *immediately the Spirit drove him out . . .*" How curious, "drove him out," as if it were something he didn't want to do! But how else does one become a prophet or a mahatma or a saint, save by trial? It happens "immediately"—a word that is characteristic of

Mark's sense of urgency, one event tumbling after another! Mark is not trying to be dramatic; nowhere does he strive for literary effect. He speaks this way because he sees the events of his story as happening under divine compulsion. There is no time to pause and ponder, what shall I do? The age itself is under pressure.

If I were to "go and do likewise" I would not hold myself aloof from the storms of our times, nor from any human community caught up in them. I would let myself be "driven out" into our wilderness world by them. I would consent to being "baptized" into the spirit and hope of my age. I would choose freely, but in a way that signified something beyond this particular choice in this present moment. This benediction I wrote long ago and have pronounced many times:

Thou, Life of all our lives, let us be joined

each unto each as one community.

May we know now the calling of our time,

and that grace that is offered us this day. Amen."

We read the voice from above, addressed to Jesus: "You are my son whom I love," or "my beloved son," in other translations. Reading a scholarly commentary on this passage, I discovered a big debate over whether Jesus alone heard these words, or Jesus and John only, or all the assembled folk. To my mind that is the kind of pointlessness that a misplaced historicism leads to. Mark is not telling us precisely what he knows did happen; he is telling us what had to have happened, because of what the ongoing sacred tradition said in order to make eminent sense of the person of Jesus.

Great interest focuses on the precise meaning of "the voice from above" because the words bear on the developing Christology, or theory of Christ's identity, in the early

Church. Here a couple of Biblical comparisons are instructive. First, Psalm 2: 7, which apparently Mark (or the tradition he is following) is quoting: “I will tell you the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son, today I have begotten you.’” The notes in the Oxford Annotated RSV say that these words are “a formula of adoption whereby the king became God’s son,” and provides further Biblical references reflecting this concept. Now see Luke 3: 22, ending: “a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased’”—words identical to Mark’s. However, a footnote on a variant reading found in some ancient manuscripts of Luke comments, “Other ancient authorities read ‘today I have begotten thee.’” The entire question of how Luke’s words came to differ in different ancient manuscripts, and which came first, is discussed in fascinating detail by William Malone. [n] I’ll offer my own conclusion: Psalm 2: 7 became the basis for the Christian claim that Jesus, being of the lineage of king David, the supposed author of the Psalm, was declared by God to be *messiah*, that is, anointed ruler. It also implies an “adoptionist Christology,” that is, the idea that Jesus became the Christ (Messiah) by adoption at the time of his baptism. This belief was reflected in the Christian creeds; the Nicene creed, dating from the 4th century CE, preserves the original language of adoption but adds a further clause to assert that the adoption, or “begetting,” preceded the creation itself: “. . . one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all the ages. . . .” [n. Bettenson, p. 37] The added phrase alters the meaning of “begetting” from adoption to incarnation, by asserting what had become the orthodox belief, namely, that Christ is co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit and “became man.” Mark’s Gospel contains no Virgin Birth nor *any* birth narrative because his “adoptionist” Christology doesn’t need them. (That the Nativity

and Virgin Birth stories in Matthew and Luke developed later than Mark is suggested by the fact that their accounts differ from each other, and are entirely absent from the Gospel of John as well as from Mark. Apparently Mark believed that Jesus' ministry—to bring, as *messiah*, God's rule to this world—began with his baptism by John the Baptist. Perhaps the alternative reading of “the voice from heaven,” found in some manuscripts of Luke, was also Mark's original language, following the Psalm, and may have been altered precisely to remove the idea of adoption.

Why are these minutia so interesting? I'd always felt that “only-begotten Son” was an assertion of Christ's *unique* divinity and that it told *how* “God became man” in the Incarnation. Indeed, old-master paintings of the Annunciation, showing the Holy Spirit as a dove shooting impregnating rays toward a kneeling Virgin Mary, beautifully illustrated the “begetting.” But Biblical history suggests an earlier sense: a king may “beget” a son by choosing a child, perhaps by saying “thou art my beloved son.” In the ancient world adoption was a common practice, for having legitimate heirs was important to rulers and land-owners.

Whether the words of “the voice from above” signify personal affection, or the simple act of choosing his representative-on-earth, this voice could only be the voice of God. Jesus is not just sent on a mission; in fact, no particular mission is prescribed. It's as if God were saying, “Do what you will.” Or perhaps, “You will know what to do.” St. Augustine famously said, “Love, and what you will, that do”—an astonishingly liberal principle of ethics, yet frontloaded with a very difficult imperative. That imperative intent is reflected in the title of a small book of meditations and prayers: *For Love's Sake Alone*. [n] James Luther Adams, drawing on Augustine's thought, sees a close

connection between will and love: we choose what we are drawn to, what we love—in a way that connects authentic freedom of will with authentic good will, or love. [n]

The voice from above gives, then, a loving and liberating word from the One Jesus often addressed as “Father,” yet not exclusively *his* father, or we would not all be invited to pray, “*Our* Father.” We know how this story turns out, and some are troubled by the thought that the death of Jesus, taken theologically as the sacrifice by God of “his only begotten Son,” can only be the act of an enraged, love-denying God. This is a weighty and extremely complex question. For now we may simply note that here, at the outset, the voice from above announces love and approval, and it is hard to see how that could change. Here again a misplaced literalism, in the guise of taking the story seriously, seems to underlie the moral judgment.

Sometimes I say of bad things happening, “There’s hell to pay.” Sometimes I hear (though I seldom speak) of “the wrath of God.” Same thing. I recall the Hasidic rabbi’s question, “Does God pray?” And his answer, “Yes, he prays that his wrath may be turned to love.” Jacob Boehme, the Protestant mystic, spoke of God’s wrath as the dark side of His love. We know about violence within families, so searing of our consciousness because it violates the sanctity of our most intimate relationships—husband and wife, parent and child, brothers and sisters. This may seem a dark tangent from our text, with its beautiful image, “the descent of the dove,” the blessed Spirit of God. But such ambiguities remind us of the tangle of emotions and motives into which love may lead us.

And look what follows—call it “tough love”! Temptation by Satan is what the Spirit “immediately drives him” into. Here *temptation* means *test*, as Lattimore has it.

That Satan tests the virtue and piety of a reputedly virtuous and pious man is the premise of the Book of Job: Is he pious and virtuous only because he is prosperous and healthy? The answer in Job is no, he is pious and virtuous for their own sake, he passes the test.

The last temptation is the final treason:

To do the right deed for the wrong reason. [n . T. S. Eliot]

Mark does not say how Jesus was tested, and there is a marvelous simplicity in his account—an example of a quality characteristic of Biblical narratives that Erich Auerbach called attention to, namely, that they are “fraught with background,” in contrast for instance to Homer, in which all details in his word-picture are brought to light. So the Biblical account seems to invite “filling in” the background, as Matthew and Luke do in their Gospels. They report three highly imaginative tests. Refusing to turn a stone into bread, Jesus says, “Not by bread alone shall man live, but by every word that issues through the mouth of God” (Matthew 4. 4), in Lattimore’s elegant and precise translation.)

The saying, now well-worn with repetition, illustrates the way in which our “seminal gospel” generates new traditions. Mark himself only knows that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days (like the Israelites’ 40 years’ wandering in the wilderness, before they could enter into the Promised Land). Yet the wilderness is closer to God than any humanly cultivated place; it is God’s garden, a peaceable kingdom where the wild animals are Jesus’ friendly companions and the angels themselves “minister to him,” that is, serve his needs. Such is the transforming power of God-ruling.

Just so, faith is an invitation to live by trust, depending upon life-sustaining resources present in the world about me, a peaceable letting go. Faith is also an invitation

to pure receptivity, responding to the sheer wonder of being, a peaceable letting be. Further, faith is a radically social principle, for it reminds me that I am and we all are utterly dependent upon each other. So charitable giving, cooperative endeavor, and even voting are essential works of faith. To cop another famous phrase from Matthew, in the wilderness I am “poor in spirit,” which is to say, utterly un-self-reliant, the opposite of being “full of myself,” hence humble, not puffed up, like the unleavened bread which nourished the children of Israel at the outset of their wilderness wanderings. [12/11/07]

Lines from Dante’s *Purgatorio* have served me as a kind of mantra, a prayer for everyday:

Give us this day our daily manna
 Without which, in this rough desert,
 They backward go who toil most to go on.

Four Mark 1. 14-20 Now is the appointed hour

Commentators have said that Jesus’ first words reported by Mark, “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the gospel,” encapsulate his entire message. The Greek word here translated “time” is *kairos*—meaning propitious time, as distinct from *chronos*, meaning chronological time. His message, then, is timely in the same sense as a harvest is timely—a time of ripeness and fulfillment. Mark supplies the context of Jesus’ message: “after John was betrayed.” This event was notorious enough for Mark to assume that we know John’s fate: he was murdered by king Herod the Great. “Great” signifies builder on a vast scale, but not, for

one capable of murdering a son, on anyone's moral scale. Caesar Augustus quipped, "Better to be Herod's pig than his son."

Jesus' call to repentance echoes John's call, except in this respect: Rather than turning from sins so that they may be remitted, Jesus calls for a turning toward the Kingdom of God. I remember, as a youngster on the playground, that when one kid would challenge another, the tough way to respond was, "Is that a threat or a promise?" Here as elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus' message is remembered not as "threatening" but as "promising." Promise and threat two sides of one coin, so the contrast between John's and Jesus' messages are easily over-drawn.

The kingdom or rule of God that Jesus announces is "near"—somewhere between "not yet" and "already upon you," or in a word, "urgent!" We can speculate that Jesus had been among the many followers of John the Baptist, and we can speculate that John's arrest was a catalytic event that propelled Jesus and those who followed him to set out on their own. We can also speculate that Mark and his circle wanted to show that Jesus superseded John: he was the Elijah to their Messiah. These ideas lend the sense of ordinary, un-miraculous history underlying the Gospel accounts, but they are inherently speculative and therefore the stuff of scholarly interpretation and debate. We note them along the way, but in the end this not a quest for the historical Jesus but a quest for a clear-sighted reading of the text.

Clear-sightedness is more than an intellectual virtue. It is a spiritual necessity, in a wild and woodsy world where religious nuts abound. Some leaden-eyed commentators call Jesus' prediction of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God a "mistake." If Jesus' whole ministry was predicated on a mistake, we might better drop the inquiry right

here. A failed prediction on such a grand scale suggests a delusional predictor. The mistake, in realms of religious understanding, is to assume that we know exactly what we are looking for in advance of the quest. No where does Jesus describe the “kingdom of God,” but only speaks in “parables,” words that conceal as much as they reveal, about “it.” As Martin Buber taught, spiritual realities are not found in the realm of *I-it* relations, but of *I-thou* relations; that is, not external, or objective relations, rather than internal or “inter-subjective” relations.

When, where, and what is this kingdom of God? It is always “near,” as Lattimore has it, or “at hand,” as the King James Version has it. Therefore it is always “available,” as Joel Henry Cadbury has it, nicely suggesting that being in existential relationship to it is intrinsic to its reality.[n] Objective facts are external to us; hence, they are observable and definable; existential realities are internal; we live within them and therefore cannot observe them objectively. The kingdom of God is neither wholly present nor utterly future, but paradoxically both. Perhaps it is a way of living in the present toward the future. Perhaps all historical movements are like that—having an electric effect upon those who “throw themselves” into them. Of course, this is a story not about some spiritual realm set apart from all ordinary, historical realms of life. It is a story about the workings of the creative spirit in human experience. Paul Tillich said that “culture is the form of religion” and that “religion is the substance of culture.”[n] So this matter of living in the present toward the future, also known as eschatology (not to be confused with apocalyptic fantasizing), suffuses everything.

If God-ruling is truly at hand, then I can reach out and grasp it. It is available. It says to me, you *can* get there from here. How will I recognize it? Don't worry, you will.

W. H. Auden, a poet who bristled with theological insights, wrote:

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. Christianity draws a distinction between what is frivolous and what is serious, but allows the former its place.

Jesus' words cited by Auden are a parable about proximate and ultimate allegiances: pay your taxes, but know to whom you owe your true loyalty. The image of Caesar on the Roman coin became an idol when the emperor Augustus declared himself a god and demanded worship from his subjects—a dimension of Jesus' words that we might miss if we did not hear in them the Jewish aversion to idolatry. Auden continues, citing parabolic words of Jesus along the way:

What it condemns is not frivolity but idolatry, that is to say, taking the frivolous seriously. The past is not to be taken seriously (*Let the dead bury their own dead*) nor the future (*Take no thought for the morrow*), only the present instant and that, not for its aesthetic emotional content but for its historic decisiveness (*Now is the appointed time*). [n. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 430.]

Words to shake us out of our lethargy, our self-pity, our sentimentality, our leaden vision!

The calling of disciples—Simon and Andrew, James and John—is Jesus' first act. Not the lonely prophet nor the closeted mystic, he is what we call “community organizer” from the outset. The early Christian church is one of the great historical examples of a voluntary association, James Luther Adams noted. We might wonder just how voluntary was it, when all he has to do is say the word, “Come, follow me,” and get immediate

action: “At once they left their nets and followed him.” We would say he was a charismatic leader, the kind of leader who understands that free will means nothing until it becomes voluntary consent to do what has to be done. And doing what has to be done is a matter of discerning the tides of the spirit, the *Zeitgeist*. It is not that Jesus can command the disciples because he, after all, has divine authority. It is that he has *charisma* in abundance, like the fairy-dust that Athena showered over Odysseus when he arose naked and begrimed from the sea, making him irresistibly attractive to Nausicca. [n. This is the first recorded use of the Greek word, *charis*.] Jesus too had passed through waters of death and transfiguration and had become irresistibly attractive.

Who does not want to be part of something great and good? Something powerful, and therefore empowering? To be sure, we must ask, is this really good? Our time is so full of dehumanizing movements claiming to be good that we should surely look twice before signing up for the next self-proclaimed “great and good” cause. Many have been burned by their own early enthusiasms and many by their life-long devotions. I have myself heeded the song, nicely crooned by Diana Krall, “Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again.” Even “after the fall” we want to be part of something great and good. Knowing that nothing else will liberate our energies, nothing less will give us to ourselves. Jonathan Edwards called it “consent to being.” [12/13/07]

Five: Mark 1. 21-28 A ministry of teaching and healing

Jesus does two things: he teaches and he heals. This is his ministry. The content of his teaching is not, it seems, new doctrines or special wisdom but the gospel itself, the immediate in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Again, we might better call it “God-

ruling,” a more dynamic, if awkward, term. I understand Jesus’ phrase as a symbol which signifies what I call “the presence of transcendence.” His teaching “with authority” is contrasted with the teaching of “the scribes,” the religious teachers who interpret ancient sacred texts and draw their authority from their reputation as faithful interpreters. (No wonder they are hostile to this “upstart” who is contemptuous of their authority.) Jesus speaks not exactly on “his own” authority but on an authority he believes he has already been given. What evidence does Mark present of this authority, his lack of dependence on others? His healings and exorcisms, stories that directly follow. These demonstrate that the kingdom of God really is “at hand,” already available to those who grasp it.

What does it mean to be a minister of the Gospel? James Luther Adams recalled Dean Dan Fenn at Harvard Divinity School saying, “Gentlemen, let me remind you that Jesus was not a parson.” [n. “Radical Laicism”] That is, he was not a member of the ordained clergy. Today the Dean would need to have said, “ladies and gentlemen,” of course, but Adams’s point was to accent what he called “radical laicism,” the recognition that ministry is a function of church membership. Ministry does *not* presuppose ordination—what in British tradition was called entering “holy orders.”

Ministry means, still today, being called to teach and to heal. More formally these are called the *prophetic* and the *priestly* offices of ministry, but even these are not necessarily professional roles. Where Martin Luther spoke of the priesthood of all believers, Adams spoke of the prophethood of all believers.[n.] Jesus provides the model of these roles, which belong to all within the realm of God-ruling.

Jesus' authority resides in his spiritual power more than the supposed wisdom or originality of his teachings. The people exclaim, "By his authority he gives orders even to the unclean spirits, and they obey him." These convulsive, "unclean" (that is, unholy) powers come from the spiritual realm, the realm of demonic and angelic powers. These spirits recognize him, Mark's text suggests, because he comes from and is in close communication with the same unearthly realm—divine and demonic.

The popular reaction is amazement. How different are these people from people today? We "sophisticated" moderns easily exaggerate the difference!

Is Jesus an Emersonian, bidding us to cast off external authorities and listen to the oracle within? Yes and no. No, he points not so much to an *inward* as to an *encompassing* spiritual reality, something that sweeps all people and all events before it. This is a difficult notion for us due, I think, to our tendency to sharply distinguish between the internal and the external. But yes, there is a certain ecstatic immediacy about this mystery, this hidden-yet-revealed realm of God's presence, and almost Emersonian way of saying: Seen with new eyes, now everything is different!

The instant notoriety that Jesus gains is striking: "The rumor of him spread into the whole region about Galilee." Needy people seek him out, scribes (religious teachers) take offense, crowds follow him and his disciples about. What do they want? Some want to put him to the test (although as we know he has already been tested by the Spirit). Most seek healing, and look for someone willing to answer "the establishment" without being intimidated.

Or more simply than these desires, the people may simply want a sign that God notices them. This, of course, is to project something of our own spiritual longing onto

the very distant people, glimpsed within Mark's text. People everywhere and always name their children so that they shall not be anonymous. Doing so, they ask the world to recognize them as distinctive and valuable individuals. And, they believe, or perhaps need to believe, that, where the world fails to do so, God nevertheless recognizes them. I want to "know" in the most personal sense "even as also I am known," in St. Paul's ecstatic affirmation.

Many philosophers, professed believers in God, have tried to imagine, or to construct, an impersonal God. God as "being itself," to use Tillich's formula, is a good example. Such philosophical designations have a conceptual dignity to them. But such passages of the gospel as this remind us of why we cannot do without a personal conception of God: we want to be personally recognized, known, loved, and we want to find our humanity anchored *just there*. Here my reflections lead me to questions of the motives, the reasons, and the will to religious assent. I am constantly writing my "grammar of assent," and am constantly inviting my reader, as a religious teacher can only do, to follow after me.

Six: Mark 1. 29-45 Works of compassion

The healings and exorcisms ("casting out demons") predominate in Mark's picture of the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. We see crowds of people clamoring for attention, for help, for his curative powers. He must escape to "a lonely place" in order to pray. He must get out of town, and on to the next, "so that I may preach there also," as his mission requires. He tries to hush up the people and even the demons about these wonders, but to no avail. He also instructs a man to go to the priest who is due "the gift

for your purification.” Mark never represents Jesus as less than a pious Jew, obedient to the Law of Moses. The reason he so instructs the man is not, it seems, for him to stay out of trouble with the religious authorities, but rather “as a proof to them,” authenticating his being cured of leprosy. The predominant impression: He has created an immense stir among the common people and they seek him out, wanting some piece of his “powerful stuff,” whatever it may be. The source of his miraculous powers, which scholars call “the messianic secret,” he wants to hide. But to no avail, for it’s like lugging home a sack of potatoes with a gaping hole in the bottom.

In his lectures on religious history, Arthur Darby Nock defined religion as “what people in community do, say, and think, *in that order*, with respect to those things over which they have no control.” Religion is communal and behavioral before it is individual and intellectual. More simply and no less profoundly he spoke of religion as “the human refusal to accept helplessness.” Paradoxically, then, religion is a way of gaining “control” in the face of conditions beyond our control.

It’s no wonder that faith-healing should be important today, as always, among believers. Being science-minded we look askance at the phenomenon. We are wary of scams and deceptions, feeding on human desperation and fear. We think: better to solve the problem by rational and scientific means. But when scientific medicine has run its course, we may find ourselves “incurably religious” precisely in Professor Nock’s sense: we refuse to accept helplessness. We may do no more than invite the presence of another person who cares, who suffers with us, who watches over us and comforts us. Someone who ministers to our human need to wrest meaning from pain and loss. Some people—they may call themselves “self-made men,” people who “have never been sick,” or

whatever—have difficulty accepting such gifts. They need to hear: sometimes it is better to receive than to give. (I've never heard the term, “self-made women,” which may help explain why women are often more easily religious than men.)

As a minister I always knew that, when someone was in ill-health, you had to be there. I also often felt that I was as much, or perhaps more, strengthened by a visit than they were. Here I learned the art of extemporaneous prayer, always voluntarily offered: Would you like me to pray with you? I wonder about Jesus' having to find “a lonely place” to pray. It seems doubtful that he was an introvert, the type of people, as the Meyers-Briggs personality type theory explains, who are exhausted by others and need to be alone to be re-energized. I know the feeling, but I am often reminded that religion is inherently communal, that God, as James Luther Adams said is “the community-forming power.” What is kept private or secret keeps leaking out. [12/20/07]

Twelve Mark 4: 1-16 A parable of parables

A small, priceless painting by the Siennese old master, Duccio, shows Jesus preaching from a boat to a multitude on the shore. It seems an odd procedure, yet picturesque and, for Mark's Jesus, characteristic. Several times in the Gospel stories he goes off on a boat, onto the Sea of Galilee, apparently in order to escape the crush of the crowds who gather wherever he appears. One reason for the crowding is the attempt to touch him, "even the hem of his garment," as we hear elsewhere. So the story reminds us of the two activities that comprise his ministry, preaching and healing. Teaching from a boat is a way of keeping physical separation; he is not an ordinary man, but a man apart.

Mark's Jesus seems both entirely human and, at the same time, removed from ordinary humanity. Far from being a puppet in God's hands, he acts with an absolute independence, absolute resolve, absolute purposefulness. He is an ordinary, "a walking around Jesus," as John Updike calls the humanized depictions of him by artists such as Rembrandt, in contrast to the ethereal, spiritualized images of him, such as El Greco's. In Mark he is a mixture of the tremendously mysterious and the utterly familiar. Some people respond to him with adulation and awe, others with hostility and fear.

The "parable of the sower" follows. Mark's Jesus tells us that this parable is "the skeleton key" to all the parables—or, simply stated, to his parabolic way of thought and speech: "And he said to them: You did not read [understand] this parable? Then how shall you understand all the parables?" Thus Frank Kermode calls the sower "a parable of parables," in the sense that this one is a key to all the others, or more generally, to

“speaking in parables” as a mode of religious discourse [n. *The Genesis of Secrecy*]. The allegorical interpretation that is given, following the parable, when the disciples ask him what it means, supports this understanding by ascribing causes to the incomprehension of most listeners. The parable concerns hearing “the word” and the frequent failures and occasional, astonishing successes it meets in the world. This is why some of his listeners greet Jesus with adulation and others, with hostility.

Parables, then, do not make a message vivid or clear to everyone, but separate those on the inside, who understand, from those on the outside, who do not. They separate the spiritually living from the dead, or those who instantly know from those who are invincibly ignorant. Max Weber, the great sociologist of religion, once said that he was “religiously unmusical,” as if to say, he could intellectually understand religious ideas and practices—as his copious writings showed—but still had no personal feeling for it. The comment seems tinged with regret, but perhaps he should not have been so hard on himself, for it was at least a moment of humble self-reflection. “If you are lost enough to find yourself,” as Robert Frost said, perhaps you are not lost after all.

Much ink has been spilled over questions of interpretation of the parable of the sower. Is Jesus himself the sower, and the seed he scatters, the words of God? Which is to say, is this the way Mark understood the parable, whether or not Jesus so understood it? Perhaps, for this is what the allegorical interpretation which follows, and is ascribed to Jesus himself, suggests. But the details of the allegorical interpretation feel contrived, with the result that a reader may begin to lose interest. When any work of art is “authoritatively explained,” we may remember the explanation but lose the impact it has on our imagination.

The three explanations for the failure of Jesus' word, among many listeners, are (1) falling prey Satan, (2) not standing fast in the face of persecution, and (3) loving the things of this world too much. There is no explaining those who *do* prove fertile soil, but the abundance of their fruits, we are told, is immense. [see Kermode, p. 29]

Once I generated my own allegorical interpretation for the three "failures" in the parable, correlating with them a moral typology: the hungry birds stand for *perversity*, the hard ground and hot sun for *moral weakness*, and the choking thorns for *self-seeking*. The opposites of these forms of spiritual failure are faith, hope, and love, traditionally called "theological virtues" and understood as foundational of all other virtues. Together these constitute a morally and spiritually fruitful life—like the seed falling on the good soil, growing up and producing an abundant crop. This is, to be sure, not pure exegesis but imaginative extrapolation. Nevertheless, it is one kind of seed planted by this seminal Gospel. Readers may wish to generate their own imaginative extrapolations.

When the disciples ask Jesus about the meaning of the parable of the sower, he speaks of a Gospel that is not only hidden from plain view, but *must* be hidden—an idea that shocks both piety and common sense. "To you are given the secret [*mysterion*] of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside all comes through parables, so that they may have sight but not see, and hear but not understand, lest they be converted and forgiven." This turns the usual idea of the nature and purpose of parables on its head, and commentators often flatly assert: Jesus can have said no such thing! Perhaps, but the first task is to understand the text before us; asking whether the historical Jesus really said it comes second, and for good reason. If we leap too quickly to the second question, we increase the likelihood that we will discover the kind of Jesus we presupposed all along.

We may do what modernist interpreters have long done, as Alfred Loisy commented long ago: “They look deep into the well of higher criticism, see a face reflected in the water far below, and declare, ‘That’s Jesus!’”

The passage is hard to swallow because we think of parables as “sermon illustrations,” meant to make ones point vivid and memorable. But the passage reminds us that parables in Biblical usage are often “dark sayings,” obscure oracles, or even riddles that only those specially gifted will be able to solve. John Bunyan quotes on the title page of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* the prophet Hosea (12: 10): “I have used similitudes.” The King James Bible here uses “similitude” for *mashal*, the Hebrew word for parable, proverb, or allegory; the corresponding Greek word is *parabole*, literally meaning “to throw beside,” hence a similitude. Mark’s Jesus has not only antecedents in the Hebrew scriptures, but descendents in the Gnostic understanding of the Gospel—an esoteric wisdom into which one must be initiated.

In this passage Jesus is citing one of the most important passages in Hebrew scripture, the call and mission of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6: 9-10)—the very passage on which the “Sanctus” of the Catholic mass is based, words that invoke the unapproachable holiness of Yahweh, whose glory is hidden by the wings of six cherubim: “*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*—holy, holy, holy!” Isaiah cannot prophesy for this unutterable holiness until his “unclean lips” are seared by coals from temple brazier.

This, then, is the reason for speaking in parables: the world is opaque, alien, deafening, blinding, demonically possessed, deadly—any or all of the above!—and we are unclean and unworthy, until the Spirit that is holy, the enlivening Word that comes from the very mouth of God, is planted there—and even then it mostly fails, so

impervious is the world to it. But some good sprouts spring up, nevertheless, and grow to produce an abundance.

The ancient Gnostics had a powerful image, explaining the spiritual deafness of humanity, an image that works even better in our age of rock and roll: “the noise of the world.” As I read Isaiah 6, the prophet is told: Tell the people that the Word of God will be inaudible to them, and before hearing it is possible they must somehow elude *the noise of the world*. Again, before they can enjoy the abundance of the promised land, they must dwell in the wilderness and live on manna from heaven. “Give us this day our daily manna,” Dante prayed.

“I like it best when the preacher tells stories,” an aunt of mine said, and an uncle instructed her, “It’s called teaching with parables.” When the Gospel is reduced to something familiar, a homey illustration of everyday life—then we are not far from the Nietzschean moment when God is pronounced dead. We “have killed Him” by clinging mindlessly to words that have lost their power, names that have become lifeless idols.

Owen Barfield, in his profound work, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, connects the words of Isaiah quoted by Jesus to idolatry in the fundamental sense of devotion to a spiritual emptiness—external “appearances”—calling forth from the prophet a divine curse. Is this what Jesus too means to say? Barfield writes, “We must hear sounding through [these words] both the voice of the prophet Isaiah and the familiar voice of the Psalmist inveighing against graven images. We cannot do otherwise than read them as alluding to idolatry.” [n. Barfield, p. 177] Barfield means by “idols” much more than physical statues or images; he means the kind of spiritual vanity that is described in Psalm 135, especially verses 15-18; those who make representations of the

sacred and devote themselves to such things, or to any “thing” of their own making, *become like these things*—deaf, voiceless, powerless, vain, spiritually dead.

Frank Kermode notes how Mark’s “so that” (or “in order that”), *hoti*, in Greek, was altered in Matthew’s parallel passage to read “because,” *hinna*, in Greek. “Because” means that Jesus speaks in parables because the people are without understanding and need help—and if they still don’t, it is their own failure. Matthew is softer on Jesus and harder on his listeners! “So that” or “in order that” puts the onus on Jesus himself: he tells parables *in order that* they, or at least those Robert Frost called “the wrong ones,” should not understand. Apparently, the difficulty of this passage was felt virtually from the outset. Matthew, whose Gospel greatly expands Mark’s, reinterprets and softens a notoriously “hard saying” of Jesus.

Robert Frost seems to have understood Mark quite well. In his important poem, “Directive,” he speaks of a child’s cup as “the grail” which has been hidden “so the wrong ones won’t find it, as St. Mark says they mustn’t,” an allusion to this passage. The poem’s mountain-climbing pilgrim—one who is “lost enough to find himself”—does find it, and does drink the cool spring water from it. “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” is the poem’s last line and it’s spiritual directive.

To my understanding, the Gospel is a saving word, a spiritual power hidden in this world, although I am mostly too “full of myself” to find it, and finding it, too proud to drink of it. The Gospel is about transformation, an inward turning that opens us outward, a being lost enough to find ourselves, a being vulnerable enough to actually “taste and see.” It is not a road map, for we must choose our own pathways, but it is a directive toward spiritual wholeness, also known as salvation.

I will think a lot more about this odd little word, *hoti*, that means “in order that” or “so that.” It is a word of hard intentionality, as when we are told that we must forgive others *in order that* we may be forgiven. We often hear about “unconditional love,” love-no-matter-what-you-do, but this *hoti* seems to fly in the face of that ideal; it smacks of cold calculation: love in order that you may be loved. St. Francis, in his famous prayer, uses the same “hard intentionality”: “For it in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” [n. Bartlett, p. 138] The Lord’s Prayer says it directly: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” [Matthew 6: 12]. No *hoti* or *hinna* here, but we can figure it out: forgive your debtors if you want to be forgiven your debts! Plato’s idea of participation in eternal forms may help us out, here: participate fully in the realm of forgiveness, both forgiving and being forgiven.

Thirteen Mark 4: 21-25 Parables of the way it is

Having instructed us on the nature of parables, several parables follow in rapid succession. The first, about the lamp that is intended for light and not to be hidden, tells us that the secret of the kingdom of God will not be secret forever: “for there is nothing hidden except to be shown, nor anything concealed except to be brought to light.” Nicely saying the same thing twice, as Hebrew poetry regularly does and even Leo Tolstoy made his potent literary practice. I may deal in obscurities, Jesus is saying, but they will not be obscure forever or I wouldn’t be doing it.

Which suggests that the time is not ripe, that “now” is still a looming “not yet,” like Saint Augustine’s famous prayer: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!” The ripeness

of time, the fullness of time, the appointed time, the *kairos*—this is the stuff the Gospel is made on. Expectation. We can say: Life itself is like that—being lived toward the future, it needs to be lived in faith. It is an obscurity, even a secret withheld from us; but perhaps not forever. It is like Saint Paul’s parable of the distorting mirror in which *now* we can see only puzzling reflections (“for now we see through a glass, darkly”), but *then* we shall see “face to face,” and “know as also we are known.” Such eschatological words bring with them a felt shudder, a humbling quiet, a longing for being-at-peace.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of reading Biblical texts not for what “lies behind” them, as if to root out the true meaning of a text by an archeological dig into its origins, but rather for what comes into view “in front” of them, thus as describing “a way of being in the world.” His thought is continuously subtle, but one sentence captures the idea: “A text. . . is like a musical score in that it requires execution.” [n. Ricoeur, *Rhetorical Invention*, “Naming God”, 162ff] Our interest in the text is not, finally, the experience from which it came, but the life, the activity, the “way of being in the world,” toward which it directs us, “a world we might inhabit.” [p. 167] Hence to believe that the lamp will be put in its proper place, not under a bushel or a bed (the old *reduction ad absurdum*), but on a lamp-stand where it will give light to all in the house—this becomes an image of the way darkness is banished, namely, by putting the lamp to its proper, its intended use. The meaning of the text lies, like a musical score, in its performance. God, the true intent of all our fallible and short-sighted intentionality, is the One who brings the truth to light—the One who puts the lamp to its intended use, “to give light to all in the house.”

This is characteristic of Jesus: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Again the note of failure to hear and to understand, of being incapable of taking in his message and

responding to it, is sounded. James Luther Adams called attention to Plato's two-edged understanding of "power" (*dynamis*): it is equally the capacity to affect and to be affected—not only active but passive. The idea is rooted in the ancient Greek idea of *dynamis*, from which we get the word "dynamic." Power is participation (*methexis*) in a force larger than ourselves; we must receive it in order to be able to express it. Just so, not to have ears to hear is to be powerless; being incapable of receiving we are incapable of giving.

I must forever, in this mode of being, question myself: Am I able to hear? If not, how could I speak? The power to make is a gift to us (we who are ourselves made), and those who deny the gift or imagine that it is no gift, being "self-made men," fashion themselves as figures of stone. Education exemplifies the double-edged character of power. All are somewhat educated, for our very humanity depends on the capacity to learn; it follows that to be relatively uneducated is to be relatively powerless.

Jesus goes straight on to utter a warning: "Consider what you hear," and lays out a conundrum that seems to have snagged Shakespeare's restless imagination, resulting in his morality play, *Measure for Measure*. Jesus' words bear repeating in full: "Your measure [your worth in the eyes of God?] will be made by the measure with which you measure [the worthiness of your own capacity to judge the worth of things], and more shall be added to you [e. g., get a "B" on this work and you'll be accounted an A+ student]." Then comes the kicker: "When a man has, he shall be given; when one has not, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

The words turn our native sense of justice on its head. Diggers looking for what underlies such a saying regularly conclude that Jesus could have said no such thing: It's

perverse! However, an exegetical principle suggests the opposite: “hard sayings” are the more likely to be authentic precisely because nobody would have, or even could have, made them up. “Authentic” is an ambiguous word, in any event: we are interested in the text itself, the document that has come into being and has exercised its seminal power by virtue of capturing a life that once appeared, if only as a camera records a series of snapshots. The saying is consonant with the parable of the sower. It is also consonant with the idea that, in God’s calculus, rewards and punishments are proportional to deeds.

The saying reminds us of that most worldly scrap of wisdom, “Them that got, gits,” except that it even suggests that God is the author of this disproportionate “justice.” Of course, it makes a great deal of difference what commodity is being distributed. Those who are given, somehow, the capacity to hear, to receive, and therefore also to respond and to speak, they will hear more, respond more, be more. And those who are, for whatever reason, tragically incapable of hearing and receiving and responding and speaking, they are so disempowered that they will be disempowered all the more. It’s as if the power, this divine *dynamis*, were the stuff of authentic living—lively, hot-to-handle stuff—that flows and ebbs in our lives. (A troubling question lurks at the edges of these reflections: Human beings may be more ethical, in the sense of compassionate, than a God who apparently affords us grossly disproportionate rewards.)

We are also active agents in the handling of this “stuff”—a crude sounding word, but apt enough if its quantity is to be “measured” as in a cup! Our measure will be taken by the truthfulness, the righteousness, the guilelessness of our measuring—our “purity of heart” (Matthew 5: 8). Again, as with my previous remarks on Mark’s use of *hoti*, “in order that,” we are surprised to learn that our own intent counts so heavily. To be judged

by the way we make judgments is daunting. “What should we do?” we ask. It’s a moment Jean Paul Sartre would relish, for he would say: Lay claim to your freedom and decide for yourself! This is not at all like standing before a cosmic judge, or even a loving parent, and being judged by a standard that may or may not be clearly known. It is more like being invited to write your own rulebook in the great game of life, this “most profound experiment / appointed unto men,” in Emily Dickinson’s mystery-laden words.[n] The obscure realm in which we dwell, the mystery of God-ruling, seems bound up with the hidden convolutions of our own hearts. [2/20/08]

Fourteen Mark 4: 26-41 It’s riddles all the way down

Jesus—Mark, in truth, since we can imagine Mark as a collector and organizer of sayings and stories of Jesus more readily than we can imagine Jesus knocking down these gem-like parables in rapid order—proceeds on a more positive note. The much-loved parable of the seed growing secretly, affirms the abundant spiritual harvest that the kingdom of God brings without the slightest effort on our part. Not a moralistic idea. Here again a note of urgency is sounded: the abundance will rot in the fields unless timely action is taken, so put in the sickle “for the time of harvesting has come.” Again, God offers, but in such a way that we must be ready and willing to act when the time is ripe.

That is, God offers when the appointed hour, the *kairos*, has come. The Greek word used here, *kairos*, means opportune time, or we could say, timely time, as distinct from *chronos*, meaning measured time, clock time. A soft-boiled egg may take four

minutes to cook properly, but when it comes to actually cooking this egg, the four-minute bell marks the *kairos*: Now get it out of the water!

English makes no verbal distinction between the two kinds of time, so we may say, “Well, it’s all the same, *really*.” The word “really” often betrays a bias in favor of the “objective” viewpoint, looking at something from the outside, as an object over against the observing subject. Shakespeare understood the difference: “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood leads on. . . .” Saint Augustine was perplexed by the nature of time in his *Confessions* and recognized, through lengthy meditations, that in the last analysis it is an expression of our internal clocks—our impassioned organisms, not our well-devised mechanisms. He has been called the discoverer of human personality, due to his way of “working up” the consciousness of self—his own self, the one who stands over against an inscrutable yet intensely personal God. This is why his autobiographical *Confessions* take the form of extended, self-reflective prayers.

Our lives are ordered by our bodily rhythms, moving within the rhythms of the day, the season, the life-time, and conscious also of epochs and the awkward shifts from one age to another. It has become fashionable to speak of our age as “post-modern,” not really knowing what that means; no wonder, for the word itself gives us no clues, except to say that our time comes after something else. Yet perhaps there is a clue in our very negation. For to define ourselves in contrast to what has gone before, is still to define ourselves in relation to it. We are “not this”—*neti, neti*, Hindus say. We must mean by this “after-the-modern” age an age that stands both in continuity with and in discontinuity

from the age that has gone before. Jesus' announcement of a kingdom that is coming and fulfills what has been long prepared follows similar lines of thought.

To enter into dialogue is to recognize that you are not me, but *an other* person, yet I am like you at least in this, that we speak a common language and "have ears to hear" one another. Personality, identity, self-consciousness: the terms point to the same hard-to-grasp inner reality, operating by its own internal clock. Nothing pursues me more relentlessly. "Tell all the truth / but tell it slant," Emily Dickinson advises: Our identity is something that pursues us like "a hound of heaven"; just this, she says, is the "most profound experiment" to which human consciousness is "appointed," an experiment assigned to us and impossible to evade. We run before our pursuer because we are aware that our chronological time is finite; our *kairos*, our fulfillment, we pray, will touch infinity.

Finally among these famous little parables of the kingdom of God ("it's like this") comes the mustard seed. It speaks of utter transformation, astonishing transformation, delightful transformation, for even the birds make nests in its boughs. This smallest-to-largest transformation sounds more literary than literal.

Effective teachers tend to speak in hyperboles. The greatest exemplar of this method in my experience was Paul Tillich, whose grand generalizations and fanciful assertions produced that most precious commodity, insight. "Tell a lie, and then qualify it," was George Lyman Kittredge's method for effective pedagogy.[n.] Or so James Luther Adams remembered from his Shakespeare classes, over which Kittredge presided as one with authority. For instance, Kittredge held that coughing in class was simply "a

personal indulgence”; when a student started hacking during a lecture he would pause and bark out, “Stop it! Just stop it!” and miraculously, the coughing would stop.

The parable of the mustard seed is hyperbolic and absolutely memorable. It reinforces our dominant impression, that the gospel is all about transformation, all about astonishment and awakening, expanding, receiving. *Agape*, the New Testament word for self-giving love, Paul Tillich spoke of in “mustard seed” terms, as the love that “cares for the smallest, without itself becoming small.”[n] Neither did Tillich ignore *eros*, averring, for instance that “the good thing about pornography” was that it extended sexuality into old age. Do I have your attention? [3/3/08]

“But he did not talk with them except in parables”—Richmond Lattimore’s translation. The King James Version is more elegant but just as bald: “But without a parable spake he not unto them.” Suppose we take this literally: *everything* Jesus said was in parables, *nothing* was in plainspoken expository prose with stories and metaphors inserted for rhetorical spice. It raises the question in our minds: just what is a parable? A “this is like that” story? But if “that” is never explained in standard expository prose we are left with a riddle or a joke: “the point” is never explained and we are left to “get it” on our own. “Getting it” is a form of insight, a revelation. Mark goes on to say that “privately with his own disciples he expounded all,” as if the inner circle were privileged—even though elsewhere they continue to play the dolt, and even though this contradicts our notion of Jesus ministering equally to all who came his way.

Paul Ricoeur: “. . . We miss what is unique about Biblical faith if we take categories such as narrative, oracle, commandment, and so on as rhetorical devices that are alien to the content they transmit. What is admirable, on the contrary, is that structure

and kerygma [proclamation] accommodate each other in each form of narration.” [n. ibid p. 170] Opening “the secret of the kingdom of God” is not a matter of ancient, esoteric, or newly minted wisdom. I think it is a presence we grasp in the moment we are grasped by it. Jesus’ teaching is of a piece with his acts of healing, for his healings are effected by eliciting words of faith from those who suffer; his preaching is of a piece with his exorcisms, for both are constituted by powerful words; his message is of a piece with his miracles, because both evoke the sense of living in a new world of possibility. All these words and deeds are expressions of what Kenneth Burke calls symbolic action.[n]

This section (Mark chapter 4) ends where it began, apparently by design: Jesus is on a boat, again escaping the crushing crowd. Again he is with his disciples, who once again go unnamed, suggesting that they may have been a motley crew of men, women, and children. This is not the precisely named twelve disciples depicted in art around the table at the Last Supper. (n. E. S-Fiorenza)

He sleeps while a violent storm lashes the boat, and is awakened only by his tremulous disciples: “Master, do you not care whether we perish?” Jesus says they would not be afraid if they had faith, and silences the storm with three words: “Silence, be still.” He is able to still the storm because he does have faith, the hallmark of which is *living without fear*. Nothing is said of Jesus having magical powers; in fact, faith, here as in other miracle stories, is accented probably to preclude the thought that Jesus practiced magic. Yet it is a miracle, a wonder big enough to cause the disciples, in an ironic twist, *really* to be afraid. “Who is this,” they say to one another, “that even the wind and the sea obey him?” It is not his power to still the storm, but what that power says about him, that frightens them.

The message is at one with the miracle. But what is a miracle? It is a wonder, something that amazes us because we cannot explain it, and delights us because we did not expect it. Do not confuse yourself with arguments over what contradicts the laws of natural science. Those laws are miracles in their own right!

And what is the message? When I sailed a glassy-calm Sea of Galilee on the Israeli-owned “Jesus Boat” on a bright Sunday morning in October, 2007, I told my fellow-travelers the story of Jesus calming the storm and chastising his companions for their lack of faith. Having traveled the roads of occupied Palestine, having felt the intense anger and hopelessness of a seething populace, I bid my companions still the storm in their hearts, as Jesus had stilled the storm on these very waters. As a miracle it hardly qualifies, I thought, but at least it’s a parable. We need not let go of righteous rage, but we do need to temper rage with reason, with clarity of intent. That seems to me the kind of transformation we are looking for. [3/4/08]

Do we dodge the obvious point of Mark’s story, that Jesus had power over natural forces, even the wind and the sea, while the disciples still thought of him only as their teacher? To answer the question with another question: But if he really “did not speak without a parable,” is not his command, “Silence! Be still!” another parable? As for history—literal, factual history, untouched by human interest—we do not know exactly what happened that day. What’s past is past. But we can read the text that has entered into history and decide whether it “reveals a world we might inhabit” (Ricouer).