

## “Cracking Mark’s Murder Mystery”

(Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 3: 1-10; Psalm 19; Mark 7: 24-37)

A great “teacher of preachers” at Princeton Seminary was Dr. Donald Macleod. A famous hobby-horse of his was a requirement that every sermon prepared by his students must have a catchy, compelling and concisely accurate sermon title. He used to tell of a certain Mrs. O’Leary who would hop on the Fifth Avenue bus on Sunday mornings in Manhattan and pass all the great downtown churches along that thoroughfare. As the bus would approach each church, she would carefully eye the sign out front where the sermon title was displayed, and then she would decide, on the basis of what she read, whether to get off the bus and attend that church. Dr. Macleod’s constant refrain was, “Pick a title that will make Mrs. O’Leary get off the bus.”

The title I settled on for this morning, though not entirely pertinent to what I intend to do, would surely have arrested the attention of anyone who likes a good murder mystery—and who doesn’t? Mrs. O’Leary probably would have. That title states, in bold print and with exclamation point, “Cracking Mark’s Murder Mystery!” and that’s where I would to *start*—with a reminder that Mark’s gospel really is a multi-layered *mystery*, first of all about who Jesus really was, and *then* it evolves into a *murder* mystery, trying to solve who killed him and why, and who let that happen and why someone—his *disciples* perhaps—didn’t do anything to stop it. Well, the thing is that Mark gives us very clever and subtle clues all along the way, so that even readers 2000 years later can crack the mystery and grasp the truth, and that’s not just exciting, it’s important!

So, there’s the fork in the road and I’m torn as to which way to go, left or right. I suppose I could follow the title, or we could dig a little deeper and chew on something more substantial. Or, I could heed the advice of my favourite philosopher/baseball player, Yogi Berra, who once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, *take it!*”

OK, so let’s start with that murder mystery thing. During this current year of the Lectionary cycle, when our gospel lessons have been predominantly from Mark’s gospel, I have pointed out how Mark loves to keep a secret just beneath the surface and how he will tease the reader with hints and sneak peeks. As I mentioned, at first the mystery is about *Jesus*—about who he *really* is and *why* he has come. And then it develops into a full-blown *murder mystery*. Well, here is how you can crack the mystery with absolute confidence. The trick is in learning to read the story just the way Mark tells it. Which means that, if it’s important to Mark how he *arranges* his episodes and how he *stitches them together*, then this needs to be a priority for the reader—notice *how* Mark tells the stories in groups, and then ask *why* he does that.

Mark’s *favourite* technique is to tell stories in groups of *three*, arranged like a sandwich, where two shorter stories on the outside are very similar and work like the bread in a sandwich, and the story in the middle is noticeably different, thicker and more filling, and really gives you something to chew on,

like the meat in a sandwich. Well, there's trick Number One: when you find a sandwich in Mark, go straight to the middle, examine the "bull's-eye" and you'll find a clue.

Today we come to *another* of Mark's favourite techniques for grouping stories. You may have wondered few moments ago, why the Lectionary wanted two separate stories to be read this morning. The answer is that the *two* form a *single unit*. These two stories belong *together*, like bookends, and accordingly I call this technique Mark's "bookends" arrangement. The trick here is to see what the bookends have in common, and then, in what subtle ways they differ. In that exercise of contrasting and comparing, you will find another clue of great help in tackling the big mystery in Mark's gospel. So, what follows here is an example in how to read a clue in a pair of Mark's bookends, and how that might help to solve the big mystery.

Let me begin by setting this image in your mind that has been running around in mine. There's a pair of bookends I saw somewhere. I think it may have been in an antique shop in Holland, but just as likely it was on the Antiques Road Show. The figures were of Holstein cows and those bookends, I can tell you, were some ugly. The two cows, as good bookends will do, were facing each other, standing in an inconceivably awkward pose, up on their hind feet, forelegs up a wall, with heads turned out toward the viewer and with a really dumb look on their faces—even for cows it was dumb. What was interesting about these bookends is how they were hand-painted in such remarkable detail you could see the two were exact opposites, *mirror images* of each other, right down to the placement of their spots—where the one had a black face and white spots, the other had white face and black spots. Interesting, garish perhaps and maybe a little goofy, but it made you look very closely.

Mark has given us two stories side by side and they are mirror image different from each other in virtually every detail, and yet there's something *not* so obvious that the two have in common. So let's do this as a classroom exercise. I'll point out the details that are opposites and you see if you can figure out what stays the *same*. Or, to phrase that differently, I'll show you the bookends and you figure out on what shelf of what section of the library they belong.

The first story is about a "Gentile" woman, which means she's *not* Jewish. She lives way up on the Mediterranean seacoast in the vicinity of Tyre, a port city in modern Lebanon. Jesus has come to *her* neighbourhood, which means he has walked a *long* way from Galilee, far to the *northwest*. The second story is about a Gentile *man*. He lives out in the area to the *east* of the Jordan River—Hebrew folks would say "out on the *wrong* side" of the Jordan—in modern-day Jordan. To get to him, Jesus has walked a *very* long way to the *southeast*.

The woman in the first story, Mark states with emphasis, was a native speaker of Greek, and it's very unlikely that she would have spoken either Hebrew or Aramaic. That seems to suggest (to me) that if they were able to communicate as well as they did, then Jesus must have been able to speak at least a little *Greek*—which just happens to play into one of my pet theories, but I won't go into that just

now. In any event, they *do* communicate. She conveys her need to Jesus, in fact she does so with great persistence, and Jesus answers her request.

The man in the second story is not able to speak at all. He has been deaf from birth and he doesn't make a sound. Though somewhat obvious, his request is unspoken. It may have been voiced by the friends who brought to Jesus, but for his own part, this man is the *very opposite* of that talkative, pushy though witty woman.

The woman, for her part, is clever enough and *bold* enough to *match wits* with Jesus. When he tosses out an old and somewhat unkind saying about bread from the table and whether this belongs to the children or the dogs, she snaps right back that even the dogs get a few crumbs—and that's *all she's asking for*. The deaf man, at the opposite extreme, probably doesn't understand what's going on, possibly has no concept of what he's *missing* in sound or speech, but he *is* able to communicate on a deeper level and in a more direct fashion.

In the case of the woman, Jesus *grants* her request, which is not for herself but for her *daughter*, and he appears to do so as a reward for her boldness, her sheer persistence and wit. In the case of the deaf man, Jesus would appear to reward the faithfulness or compassion of the *friends* who brought him, whose request was also brought on behalf of *another*.

So, let me summarize: geographically, ethnically, in gender and character, verbally and dramatically, the two stories are just about as *opposite* as can be. So, what is it that ties them together into a single unit? On what shelf of the library do these bookends sit?

Well, if you follow those geographical details, the fact that *both* stories take place *outside* of Israel, far away from Jerusalem *is* a *key*, and it's as much a theological statement as it is geographical. For people who lived *within* the Hebrew "Promised Land", it was *expected* that God could *act*, miraculously if he wished; faith could see it and history would affirm it. But *outside* that land, over on foreign turf where people know little or nothing of the One True God, such things were *not* expected, nor would they likely be sought out *in faith*. They might be sought in *other* ways, through magic or potions or sacrifices, but probably *not* in faith. In both stories Jesus is deliberately going *out* from the land of the supposedly faithful, and out into the world beyond. Here's the analogy that the first readers of this gospel would have sensed: he's going outside the temple or church, out into the *secular* world, onto *foreign* turf. He meets people in their need, and he responds to those needs simply because the needs are there, because they exist, because these people hurt. And he gives freely, without conditions or qualifications, to provide what these people need. In that encounter between Jesus and human needs, people can *discover* faith, they can *come to* faith, they can be *changed by* faith.

What Jesus is really doing in this bookend pair of stories is this: he's going *out* the church door, *taking it to the streets*. There's a little story behind that phrase. All week long, while working on this text, I had an old song running around in my mind. I wasn't sure why, but I could not shake it loose. I could remember only a few of the words at first, but the tune and rhythm were strong. See if you can recall

the tune, and maybe even figure out the connection. The song is about 45 years old, written and performed by a group called The Doobie Brothers, it was the title song for their 1976 album called “Takin’ it to the Streets”. It goes like this: “Take this message to my brother / You will find him everywhere / Wherever people live together / Tied in poverty’s despair.” And then, turning directly to the audience, it continues: “You, telling me the things you’re gonna’ do for me / I ain’t blind and I don’t like what I think I see.” Then follows the chorus, which repeats, “Takin’ it to the streets... Takin’ it to the streets...”

That’s a powerful message. And that’s what *Jesus* did, what he gave us as an example and what he still needs and expects his *church* to do today. What happens *in here*—as noble or challenging as that may be—is only the *smallest part* of our reason for being. What happens *out there* is why we are here. And if *we’re* not *taking it to the streets*, it’s going *nowhere*.

I’ll leave the question open here as to the clue in this text that speaks to Mark’s murder mystery. Chew on it for a while, and it will come to you. In the meantime, I want to follow a different direction on the idea about “taking it to the streets.”

Here’s a neat tidbit of historical trivia. In ancient Greece, in the time of Jesus and long before that, vendors and peddlers who took their goods from place to place had a curious practice, used by nearly all of them. If a peddler had, say, copper pots to sell, when walking through the streets he would not shout out, “Copper pots, I have copper pots for sale!” Or if he had fish or fruit or trinkets, he wouldn’t just announce what he had. What he would shout out was this question, “What do you *lack*? What *do* you lack?” That’s different, isn’t it? Makes you want to come to the window and see. It makes you do a little introspection and perhaps even a personal inventory before you go out to make a purchase. It really makes you eager to see if *what* that person in the street *has*, is going to *match* what you’re *missing*.

When Jesus takes his faith and his challenge out into the streets, his question to each one is “*What* do you *lack*?” And his challenge for us, for faith and even for those who have not yet come to faith, is just to put our finger on what we’re *missing*, what the real *deeper need* is, what we’re still lacking despite all our efforts. We may be different in every way from each other, and the people out there may be different still, but in Jesus Christ and the faith he encourages in us, there *is* what *each* one is *lacking*. He *has* what we need *most*, and he still offers it freely, without conditions, wherever people are in need, wherever they might be craning their necks a little to see just what he’s *got*, to see what his grace can *do*.

Back to that murder mystery—do you suppose that by taking his faith *out of* the temple, out of the Jewish *homeland* and right out into the *streets*, do you suppose *that* was what got Jesus silenced? Does that sound like something *Mark* would say in his gospel about Jesus? And does that also sound like something Jesus would tell his *disciples* to do?