

INTRODUCTION

Curly: None of you get it. Do you know what the secret of life is?

Mitch: No. What?

Curly: (Holds up his right index finger) This!

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing, just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean ____.

Mitch: That's great, but what's the one thing?

Curly: That's what you've gotta figure out.

City Slickers, directed by Ron Underwood, 1991

The evangelist Mark and Curly agree on a key point: the secret of life is but one thing. The challenge is to discover what that one thing is. In the fourth chapter of his gospel Mark pictures Jesus saying to his disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4:11). Unlike Matthew (Mt 13:11) and Luke (Lk 8:10), Mark uses the singular when he speaks of the secret of the kingdom. For Mark there is but one thing to learn, one mystery to be broken open.

Breaking that secret open, however, is difficult. For many Christians contact with the gospel comes primarily in the Sunday lectionary readings for Year B, and the lectionary breaks the gospel up from week to week into individual passages that get our attention. The gospel as a whole and how this particular passage fits in the strategy of the gospel fade into the distant background as our attention focuses on the particular story. Homilists may preach well on the particular Sunday reading from Mark, but the good news that unfolds slowly as the gospel progresses through the story of Jesus often eludes us for many reasons. Many homilists preach in a rotation. Unless all involved in that rotation coordinate how they want to develop the message of Mark in their preaching over year B of the lectionary, it becomes even more difficult

to let the theology of the gospel develop in their preaching. Nor does the structure of the lectionary always help. It leaves out key passages in its coverage of the second gospel. Sometime in August the lectionary drops Mark in the middle of a key section to read John 6. The feasts on the Sundays following Pentecost wipe out important passages, usually from the fourth chapter of Mark.

Outside the liturgy, readers, too, can have a difficult time getting at the core of Mark's message. As readers, we may concentrate on isolated passages. The overall structure of the gospel, in which individual passages find their meaning, is not obvious. That one central secret of the gospel, which every passage reflects, may escape us.

We are called to hear and preach the gospel, not just individual stories lifted out of their context. Those who gave us the current lectionary attempted to structure it so that we might spend a year contemplating the gospel of Jesus Christ as the evangelist Mark gives it to us. Mark has a message and a theology. It unfolds slowly as his gospel progresses, and each element in his telling the story of Jesus helps develop his proclamation of the good news and the secret that lies at its heart. Too often the current structure of the lectionary fails to foster such an approach.

Mark writes the whole of his gospel to help the reader crack the code of that secret. It is not an easy task. It takes sixteen chapters to look at this mystery from various angles and to explore the various layers of its meaning. The mystery unfolds as the individual reader, the preacher, and the congregation undergo a process of conversion as they move step by step through Mark's development of his theology. Even then the task may not be complete, for at the end of the gospel the angel at the tomb of the risen Jesus tells the frightened women to go back to Galilee, where the story had begun. If the mystery leaves you shaken or if you have not yet understood the heart of it, you must return to the beginning and work your way through the clues once again.

The mystery Mark puts before us must be broken open and solved, for the gospel proclaims a message we must come to terms with. But unlike other mystery stories, the mystery of the gospel continues to resist a final solution. For the mystery we confront in the gospel is the very reality of God at work in our lives. We do not so much grasp it, as it grasps us and calls us ever more deeply to encounter God, whose mys-

tery is beyond our power to comprehend or to contain.

Clues to the mystery abound in this gospel. They range from the healing of a woman with a fever to the challenge of what we are to do with bread. They come in the form of parables. Rarely, however, do we get a direct statement. Mark does not believe that a direct statement of the secret will work. The reader and the hearer must be immersed in the mystery if it is to make sense. One must come to know it through one's experience. It runs too contrary to the world's wisdom to make any sense if it is just openly stated. Further, like all things of God, the mystery of the kingdom of God cannot be stated directly because it transcends this world. It can be approached only through metaphor, parable and symbol. So Mark approaches it indirectly.

Mark uses three techniques in this indirect approach. First, he places passages next to one another that we must interpret in the light of each other. The deeper meaning does not lie with one or the other passage but in the creative tension between the two. One of the more significant examples of this is in the eighth chapter where Jesus heals a blind man and then goes on to the discussion of the common perception of Jesus. Peter's inability to get any deeper than "You are the Messiah" is mirrored in the blind man's ability to see, but everything is still blurry. The blind man who still needs healing of his partially restored sight is Peter. What does he need to see to be healed? The passage that follows—Jesus teaching about the cross—is crucial.

This first of Mark's techniques makes interpretation difficult for the person who only hears the gospel on Sunday, the casual reader, and the homilist. Taking passages piecemeal Sunday after Sunday will not get to the gospel Mark is proclaiming. There is a connection between the healing of the blind man, Peter's incomplete confession regarding the identity of Jesus, and the first prediction of the passion. Reading or preaching each story as an isolated unit fails to catch the message of the sequence.

A second technique Mark uses is chiasmic structure. A chiasmic structure is like a sandwich in which the passages occur in a sequence of A B A'. The two A passages, which have some common theme, shed light on the B passage which they surround. The B passage usually bears the central message of the related passages. For example, the first miracle in Mark tells the story of Jesus casting a demon out of a man. The story of

the exorcism is the B element in this chiasmic structure. Mark has surrounded this story with references to Jesus' teaching. Jesus enters the synagogue to teach, and the response to the miracle is amazement at Jesus' teaching. We are not told what Jesus has been teaching, but the content of the miracle story provides an important clue. The teaching of Jesus is that he has conquered Satan in the desert and now has the power to drive evil out of our lives.

Mark also uses longer chiasmic structures. He can have five elements that move in the pattern A B C B' A', or seven elements in the pattern A B C D C' B' A'. In each case the central passage bears the message of the whole pattern, and the paired stories illustrate it.

Finally, Mark's gospel as a whole has an overall pattern, although scholars disagree about exactly how the gospel is organized. Some see the gospel divided into two halves with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ marking the central dividing line. Others see the gospel divided into three parts organized around the three great statements that Jesus is the Divine Son at the baptism, the transfiguration, and the crucifixion.

I think there is a much subtler organizing principle for the gospel as a whole. Mark has organized it in layers. Each layer offers clues about the central mystery of the kingdom of God from a particular perspective. As readers begin to come to some clarity about the kingdom of God from that perspective, Mark moves on to a further layer that calls the reader more deeply into the mystery. The gospel is like a series of boxes each beautifully wrapped and each containing within it further beautifully wrapped boxes. Readers are immersed in the theme of the outermost box, and just as they think they have the secret solved, Mark says no, there is a box inside this one you must unwrap and contemplate. The gospel keeps moving more deeply into the reality of the mystery of the kingdom of God until it reaches its resolution in the climax of the story. If one has not come to terms with the mystery, Mark ends the gospel by telling us to start again where the gospel began in Galilee.

The structure of the gospel needs close attention if we are to unravel the mystery which it proclaims. Both the reader and the preacher must be aware of the kinds of constructions that hold various passages together. The clues to the secret of the kingdom often lie between passages. The reader must also be aware when Mark has moved to a new, deeper layer

in his contemplation of the mystery. With each new box the questions that the reader and homilist are asked to address open a new perspective that the homilist especially must explore with the congregation.

However, the position the reader and the homilist must finally take up in relation to the gospel is not that of analyzing the structures of the text. Hermeneutical theory speaks of three strategies an interpreter may take in approaching the text. First, one may look behind the text. Here the attention of the interpreter is on the world out of which the text emerged. Various questions engage us when we take up this perspective: for what kind of community did Mark write the gospel? What was happening historically that may have shaped Mark's message? Where was the gospel written? Who was the real author of the gospel attributed to Mark? What were the actual historical events in the life of Jesus upon which the gospel is based? What was the mind and intention of the author in writing the gospel? These are the questions which the various methods of historical critical interpretation address.

Secondly, the reader and the preacher may concentrate on the text itself. Here they focus on the structure and themes of the gospel. They ask questions such as these: What is the overall structure of the gospel? What literary devices does Mark like to use to shape his message? Who are the key figures in the story Mark tells, and what is the plot line? Most importantly, they ask what kind of world the gospel presents and what way of being in the world Mark imagines is possible for humankind.

Finally, the interpreter can position himself in front of the gospel. Here one is not analyzing the world of the gospel or how the text is constructed. Rather, the world of the gospel and how the text is structured engage the reader and the homilist in such a manner that one begins to wonder about the possibilities in one's own world if the world the gospel projects is truly credible.

Taking up a position in front of the text involves three hermeneutical assumptions. First, the text of the gospel bears a surplus of meaning. This text is so rich, so full of potential meaning for the human community, that no one interpretation is ever able to capture and nail down once and for all the meaning of the gospel. We see something similar in the life of Jesus. His life is so full of meaning that we have four canonical gospels, each of which interprets the story of Jesus from a very different angle. The

same holds true for each of those four gospels and the gospel of Mark in particular. The gospel of Mark did have a specific meaning in the mind of its author and in the world that originally received and read it. But neither the mind of Mark nor the initial reading of the gospel by his community can exhaust the possibilities of what Mark has brought to expression. As the gospel spread from its original setting and new communities read it from different perspectives down through the history of the Christian people, new meanings came to light.

Secondly, this surplus can give birth to a pluralism of possible interpretations of the gospel. However, pluralism does not justify a wide-open relativism or a tendentious reading whereby the preacher may impose whatever he wants or needs on the gospel. Some homilists can be quite creative in what they find in the gospel, but they do not always respect the gospel as a work that has an integrity of its own. The gospel itself as a work, with its themes, its structure, and the world it projects, limits the pluralism of possible readings.

The pluralism of possible readings of the gospel is rooted in the third hermeneutical theme which comes into play when readers position themselves in front of the text: the possibility of a fusion of horizons. The gospel presents us with an understanding of the world and a way of being in the world. If the gospel has any merit at all, this way of viewing the world ought to shake us to our foundations because the world that it imagines holds such different possibilities from the one in which we now find ourselves comfortable. It invites us to see differently, to imagine ourselves and our relationships differently, to engage reality in a way that reaches for a new set of possibilities. On the other hand, the world in which we live, the world of our everyday assumptions about life, brings a new perspective and a new set of questions to the text which medieval or nineteenth-century Christians could not have imagined. When these two worlds meet—the strange world of the text and the world of the interpreter—a fusion of the horizons of meaning of those worlds becomes possible. The perspectives and questions of the world of the interpreter open aspects of the meaning of the gospel that earlier generations have not seen. At the same time, the reading of the gospel reshapes the world of the reader and the homilist. The gospel opens new possibilities for human life because the imagination is able to see the world in new ways.

The gospel of Mark places before readers a new and different world from the one in which they normally live. It is a world where a small amount of food can feed thousands, where the evil that has come to possess people can be driven out, where a word can quiet chaotic storms at sea. It is a world where life can come from death. At its heart lies the secret, which the gospel seeks to reveal. The gospel calls the reader to a new world. Ultimately the task of the reader and homilist is to engage in such a fusion of horizons. If Jesus can expel the evil from a man's life in the gospel, what is possible in our lives? The gospel ought to shake the foundations of the reader's world and invite one into a world in which new things are possible.

In this book we will not spend a great deal of time behind the text. The search for the actual history on which the gospel rests, the effort to understand the mind of Mark, or the scholarly work that seeks a historical sense of the Greco-Roman culture of the community for which he initially wrote are all interesting and important tasks. However, they are not the task of the preacher or the person of faith reading the gospel for spiritual nourishment. Preachers and readers of the gospel of Mark need to take up the last two hermeneutical stances: within the text and in front of the text. They need to come to terms with the structure and themes of the gospel so that they might understand the world envisioned by the text. Then they need to stand before the text in such a way that the gospel opens new possibilities for life.

Hermeneutical theory overlooks one ingredient that is essential for a fusion of the horizons of the world of the gospel and the world of the contemporary Christian community. That ingredient is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works through the gifts and genius of the author, Mark, who has given us a text that bears such a wealth of meaning. And the Spirit works in the community and through the homilist who enables new dimensions of meaning and promises of life to emerge in a new reading of the gospel. Openness to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit through prayer is therefore essential if the gospel is to speak to our communities in the early twenty-first century.

Each chapter of this book will address one of the consecutive layers or boxes that make up the gospel and through which Mark slowly reveals the secret of the gospel he proclaims. Each chapter will first

examine the literary structure and devices Mark uses and the world the text envisions. Then it will move from a position within the gospel to one in front of the gospel and examine what is possible for the Christian community today if the world of the gospel is true. It is there in front of the text that an applied reading of the gospel takes place.

This book has several audiences in mind. The first is preachers. Good preaching involves a fusion of horizons. It brings together the world the gospel proclaims and the world of those who hear in it a new set of promises for life. It offers a new way of understanding and being in the world. Thus I hope to break open the world of the gospel of Mark and bring it into dialogue with the world of the early twenty-first century. I have also written this book for those who would like to take a deeper look into the gospel of Mark without becoming overly involved in the technical study of Scripture.

I have written this book as a conversation about the themes of the gospel of Mark and a number of themes that are important in systematic theology. A number of friends have asked why a systematic theologian would venture to write a book on the Scriptures. There are several reasons I have chosen to do so. I am a homilist. I preach in a regular Sunday rotation in a Catholic parish. So I find myself often engaged with the text of the gospels. Like any other preacher I read a lot of material that comments on the text. The material I find most helpful is that which situates the particular reading in the larger context of the gospel as a whole. I also find it very helpful to bring in the themes I deal with as a systematic theologian. Too often the specialization involved in their academic disciplines keeps the biblical scholar and the systematic theologian from appreciating each other's work. Yet both are anchored in the same reality, the person and story of Jesus, the Christ. What ought to bring them together is the service of the community that seeks to be disciples of Jesus. This book hopes to offer of that kind of service.

Finally, readers of this book may notice that I use quotations from various translations of the Bible. I have done so because different translations emphasize themes or catch nuances I want to stress.