

# THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 1:1–45

“’Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen tongue.”

William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, V.iv

## **The World of the Text**

The opening section of Mark’s gospel invites us to dream. It proclaims the powerful work of God in our world through Jesus and asks us to consider what is possible in human life if it is in our midst. Our dreams are not to be timid; they are to be bold. Our dreams must move beyond the limit of what our everyday, common sense view of the world tells us is possible. We are to embrace again the age-old hopes and dreams of the human race since the time of Adam and Eve; we are to look at the world through the visionary eyes of the prophets and to live the ancient wisdom of the sages. To the worldly wise these dreams may be “such stuff as madmen tongue,” but if the kingdom of God is on the horizon, these dreams now become possible in a way they have never been possible before.

The dreams we are invited to enter are not simply those of the human

race, or even of its great visionaries and seers. They are the dreams of God for creation. They represent what God had in mind when God first called this world into being. They embody the purpose of God throughout the history of God's saving work. The Scriptures use a code word for these dreams: the kingdom of God. The term is rather elusive, as all dreams are. Hans Küng describes the kingdom in the following way:

It will be a kingdom where, in accordance with Jesus' prayer, God's name is truly hallowed, his will is done on earth, men (and women) will have everything in abundance, all sin will be forgiven and all evil overcome.

It will be a kingdom where, in accordance with Jesus' promises, the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are downtrodden will finally come into their own; where pain, suffering and death will have an end. (*On Being a Christian*, p. 215)

Mark's gospel invites the reader to enter a world in which this vision is no longer the stuff of dreams, but a real possibility, for God is at work in our world and in our lives.

The first section of Mark's gospel consists of the forty-five verses of the first chapter. The heart of the section lies in Mark 1:14–15, a proclamation that the ultimate act of God in human history is taking place through God's Son, Jesus. This short passage is central not only to this opening section; it also provides the key to the whole gospel. In Mark's mind it is the gospel. Four quick clauses give expression to this central message: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom has arrived. Repent and have faith in the good news (the gospel)." Mark shows the reader that this short passage is at the center of the gospel by placing it in the middle of a chiasmic structure that runs A B A'. In so doing he inserts it between the repeated word "gospel," thus marking these four short clauses as a short, terse summary of the whole of the gospel message. The chiasmic structure looks like this:

A The word "gospel."

B The proclamation of the kingdom.

A' The word "gospel."

The two A elements are simply the word "gospel" which surrounds and gives a framework of interpretation to the central verse, 1:15. The

central B element announces the presence of the kingdom of God. Mark structures the opening proclamation of Jesus in this way so that his reader will not miss the fact that these two sentences contain the controlling idea of the whole gospel. These two sentences, then, *are* the gospel:

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the *gospel* of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the *gospel*." (1:14–15, NAB)

The rest of Mark's sixteen chapters serve to unravel the meaning of these verses.

These first, crucial words of Jesus make a proclamation and call for a response. The proclamation is daring and radical. Time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God is here. Mark emphatically insists that the kingdom of God has arrived. For that reason Mark turns his face to the future, for the end time and the promises it holds are already in view. For Mark the kingdom of God has arrived and already impinges on our lives.

This imminent reign of God calls for a twofold response. First, it summons us to repentance, to a radical change in the patterns of our lives. Repentance means changing not just our patterns of action, but also our patterns of thought. We must change the way we see the world so that we imagine what is possible. When something new breaks upon us, something new is possible. By changing the patterns of our lives, we seek to embrace the possibilities that God's kingdom holds out to us.

Secondly, this proclamation summons us to faith. By faith Mark means an attitude of trust and belief. Faith implies more than thinking the message is true or cleaning up our moral lives and living by the commandments. In Mark faith means living as if the possibilities the message proclaims are practicable. The gospel introduces a basic tension in the life of the Christian. The kingdom and the future it opens up are present and yet not realized. The response of faith provides the link between this presence, which holds such a powerful potential, and its realization. Jesus proclaims the kingdom and opens a way out of the present impasse in which humanity finds itself. But the promise is realized only when it is embraced in the lives of those who hear the message. Repentance and faith are not acts of preparation for the arrival of the kingdom. They are acts of response to the presence of the kingdom,

acts that allow the proclaimed promises to take root and be realized in human life.

Mark invites his readers to dream. He challenges the people of God to live as if the promises of God were truly possible. He asks them how they must live if everyone is to share the abundance God created in this world; if there is to be forgiveness among human beings; if the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are downtrodden are to come into their own; if God's name is to be kept holy. In this first section of the gospel Mark has undertaken the daunting task of reshaping the imaginations of those who hear him as they think about their lives and their world.

The second passage upon which Mark builds the structure of his first chapter is Mark 1:32–34:

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him. (NRSV)

This short passage is a Markan summary. Mark did not take this statement from the oral or written traditions handed down by the community but composed it himself. Mark uses this summary to draw together the themes he emphasizes in the miracles of the second half of the section and to tell his reader that such things were happening over and over again. Mark wants to draw our attention to the results of believing the gospel of the kingdom and changing our lives in accord with that good news. The kingdom of God dramatically alters the lives of those who believe. It makes them whole, heals them, and re-creates their lives. Mark stresses that great numbers of people came to believe the message of Jesus and that Galilee was flowering with the realized promises of the kingdom of God. Jesus makes those who were sick whole. Those plagued and captured by evil he sets free.

The section moves from the promise and challenge of 1:14–15 to the faith and resulting wholeness manifest in the miracles of the second half of the chapter. It proclaims the kingdom of God, the time of God's decisive action in human history, and shows the results in the lives of the people who have faith in the promised reality of that kingdom. The

recreative power of God, present in and through Jesus, makes whole the lives of the people who have faith in what Jesus has proclaimed in their midst. The relationship of these two passages then serves as the foundation of the first section of the gospel.

The rest of the chapter supports these central themes with allusions to apocalyptic literature and expectations. These apocalyptic themes must have flourished in the community to which Mark addressed the gospel. The following are the key elements in the apocalyptic view that Mark incorporates into this first section of his gospel.

1. The apocalyptic tradition takes a pessimistic view of the human prospect within history, which has become hopeless. The Jewish people had suffered too many historical defeats and setbacks to hope for salvation within history any longer. The Assyrians and the Babylonians had defeated them. They had lived under the yoke of the Persian Empire. After struggling against the Seleucid and Ptolemaic successor states to Alexander the Great, they had managed to win their freedom for only a few short decades. Then Pompey and Caesar visited the near East, and the Jewish people lived under the boot of the Roman Empire up to the time of Jesus and beyond. Given this history of political, economic, and cultural oppression, apocalyptic spirituality no longer looked for salvation within history. If there was to be salvation of any kind, it would put an end to history altogether and bring the beginning of something new.

2. A pessimistic view of history did not mean that God's people were without a lively hope, however. In fact they looked forward to a decisive intervention by God on their behalf that would establish the kingdom of God and put an end to the history of this world in which they had suffered so much. Apocalyptic Judaism and Christianity looked forward to the time, the *kairos*, in which this world and its history would end and God would establish his kingdom.

3. Apocalyptic spirituality is highly dualistic. Its adherents see so much suffering in the world that they assume there must be some malevolent force behind it. God stands over against this evil force, and the history of the human race and the whole cosmos serves as the arena in which they war with one another. The apocalyptic view

makes a radical distinction between good and evil and has little room for ambiguity or gray areas. The forces of light and darkness are involved in a cosmic struggle, and there is no room for neutrality. You are either on one side or the other.

4. This struggle between good and evil will reach its climax at the end of time. At that time one final, cosmic battle will be fought in which God will conquer the forces of evil.

5. Having conquered evil, God or his agent, the Son of Man, will judge between those on the side of light and those on the side of darkness. Only those whose lives are marked by a goodness manifest in their faithfulness to God's covenant with his people will be brought into the promised kingdom of God.

6. This rewarding of the good and punishing of the evil cannot take place completely within time. Too many have suffered and died for their faith without receiving any perceptible reward in this life. Therefore, the apocalyptic outlook is marked by a belief in resurrection, in which the just will receive their due reward in a new risen life.

7. Apocalyptic literature often describes the coming of the kingdom of God in terms of a re-creation. Lacking any experience of what the end-time might be like, apocalyptic writers describe it first as an un-creation, a destruction of the order God originally created as the forces of light and darkness struggle with one another. The sun, the moon, and the stars which God placed in their appointed orbits will fall from the sky; the earth which God set firmly on its foundations will be shaken to its core. Having conquered evil in this destructive battle, God will then begin anew and re-create the heavens and the earth for God's people.

8. In some apocalyptic writings, Elijah or the Mosaic prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15 will come before this end-time struggle, announcing the coming of God and the kingdom.

9. Apocalyptic literature uses a great deal of imagery borrowed from the mythologies of the ancient Near East. It is, therefore, a highly symbolic type of literature, which loves to hide its secrets behind

an esoteric symbolic code. You have to be an initiate to understand its full meaning. Thus we find it difficult to read in our time.

Using this apocalyptic background, Mark structures his first chapter to enhance and draw out the implications of the central message he has delivered in 1:14–15 and 1:32–34.

Mark begins with a compilation of prophetic quotations:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;

He will prepare your way.

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

Prepare the way of the Lord,

Make straight his paths. (NAB)

Mark attributes these words to Isaiah, but in fact he takes them from Malachi 3:1 as well as Isaiah 40:3, with a hint of Exodus 23:20, which predicts an angelic guide for God's people. The lines from Malachi would awaken in Mark's reader an expectation of the end-time, for Malachi had prophesied that God would send his messenger before him when God came to act decisively to put an end to evil and save his faithful people. Mark takes the quotation from the book of Isaiah from the beginning of the oracles of Second Isaiah. This exilic prophet reworked and bound together two important themes of the Hebrew Scriptures: creation and the exodus. He did not emphasize the past, however, but rather the future action of God. He weaves the notions of exodus and creation together to describe the mighty acts by which God will restore his exiled people to their land and their status as his chosen people.

The line from Isaiah quoted by Mark opens a passage that combines these motifs. God will create the highway of the new exodus for the return of his people to their land. God will recreate the earth, uprooting mountains and filling in valleys to save and reconstitute his people once again. Thus with his quotations in 1:2–3, Mark has already begun to raise the apocalyptic expectations of his readers. He has us looking for the messenger who will come before God, preparing his way, and he has us thinking in terms of a new re-creative act of God that will save his people in the same way that God saved them from their slavery long ago in Egypt.

Mark then introduces John the Baptist. He so pictures John that there

can be no doubt in the reader's mind that John is Elijah, the promised prophet who would come before the Lord. Mark borrows his picture of John's dress from 2 Kings 1:8, which describes the dress of Elijah. Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 to depict John as Elijah, for Malachi 4:5-6 calls the forerunner Elijah. Mark places John out in the wilderness because the wilderness is reminiscent of new beginnings: the void out of which God originally created the world and the desert in which God created his first people, Israel. Thus God's new creation and exodus begin like those of old, in the desert, in the emptiness of the wasteland. John, the herald of the new age, announces the one who will follow him and prepares the people for this new beginning with a baptism of repentance. Here in Mark, John does not announce the kingdom as he does in Matthew's gospel. In Mark that role is reserved for Jesus.

With our expectations thus raised, Jesus comes on the scene. Jesus' baptism by John opens the story of the kingdom of God. The baptism of Jesus caused great consternation in the early Christian community. It was difficult for them to explain why Jesus needed baptism by John, especially when there may have been some competition between the followers of Jesus and those of John in the early days of the church (Acts 19:1-7). The fourth gospel does not even mention the baptism. Luke reduces it to a backdrop for the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus by placing it in a subordinate clause (Lk 3:21). Matthew reports it, but feels obliged to address the question of why Jesus would need baptism. He includes a discussion between Jesus and John the Baptist regarding why Jesus' baptism is necessary for the sake of fulfillment. Only in Mark does the baptism of Jesus play an integral role in the dramatic action, for in the baptism the Father anoints Jesus to be the agent of God's kingdom: through him God decisively acts in human history. The Father does not speak to the crowds as he does in Matthew, but to Jesus, whom he is calling to a special role in the salvation of God's people. Mark has no infancy narrative or introductory poem about the incarnation. Instead, the story of our salvation begins with the call of Jesus at his baptism.

After his anointing, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, the arena of God's creative activity. In the desert Jesus struggles with Satan. To an apocalyptic mind the meaning of this desert struggle is clear. The end-time battle between the forces of light and darkness has begun. The

drama of the end-time is under way. The struggle, however, is not quite what the apocalyptic seers had expected. The lights of the heavens are not falling; the earth remains firm on its foundations. No monsters appear out of the sea, as the book of Revelation depicts. This battle takes place in the human heart. One man, the Son of God, dares to face the forces of evil.

Curiously, Mark does not tell us who won. But he closely links the story of the struggle in the desert to the proclamation of the kingdom in 1:14–15. Those verses proclaim the victory of God over Satan through the faithfulness of his Son in the face of evil. Jesus wins the victory in the desert, in the void and emptiness where God's action always begins. With the defeat of Satan the kingdom of God begins to become a reality. Now the *kairos*, the ripe time for humanity and its hopes and dreams, is at hand.

Having made the announcement of the kingdom against this background, Mark then shows us a variety of responses and their results. The first to respond are Simon, Andrew, James, and John. These four will form the inner core of Jesus' followers, and Mark will explore the meaning of discipleship by following their responses throughout the story of Jesus. In his story of these four men, Mark works out his notion of what a faith-filled response to the proclamation of God's kingdom entails.

At this point Mark is making several key points about discipleship. To embrace the promises and hopes of the kingdom of God, the disciple must leave an old world behind. Discipleship dislodges and dislocates. The four leave their families and occupation as fishermen to follow Jesus. The change in fundamental life patterns that the kingdom calls for cuts deeply. The disciples must let old worlds die. The kingdom calls them to let go of old patterns of relating to others and change how they see the world and themselves. The gospel summons the disciples to live the pattern of hope that the dreams of the kingdom hold out. A new imagination fired by a new vision begins to shape the life of the disciples, and they begin to live differently. To have faith is to take a step on the path that this new vision has opened.

Secondly, the disciple cannot do this alone, but needs the support of others in the Christian community. An individual cannot re-create the face of the earth. However, a community moved by the Spirit and vision

of Jesus can. The first disciples left the world of their nets and boats as a group, and together they followed Jesus.

Having described the challenge of discipleship, Mark shows us the results of this walking in faith by presenting his reader with the first miracle of Jesus in 1:23–28. Like Jesus' first words, the literary device of enclosure marks the story of this first mighty act of Jesus. This chiasmic structure has three elements which again run A B A'. The A elements, which mention Jesus' teaching with authority, introduce and close the miracle story. A response of amazement is standard in any miracle story, but here the amazement is not at the miracle but at Jesus' teaching. The structure looks like this:

A Jesus is teaching in the synagogue with authority.

B Jesus performs the miracle and casts the evil spirit out of the man.

A' The people are amazed at the *authority* with which Jesus teaches.

Thus Mark underscores the teaching of Jesus in this miracle story. However, as happens often in this gospel, Mark does not reveal the content of Jesus' teaching. Throughout his gospel Mark will tell us that Jesus taught, and yet he will rarely reveal the content of that teaching. To learn the content of Jesus' teaching the reader must watch the passages surrounding or near the one that mentions the fact that Jesus taught. And only in an indirect way do they show us what he taught. In this story Jesus teaches that he has defeated Satan, that he has the power to cast out evil from our lives. With regard to this miracle story, we can draw two conclusions. First, we already know the content of Jesus' proclamation, for the content of the gospel was given in 1:15. The kingdom is at hand, so Jesus must have defeated Satan in the desert. Second, the content of the teaching is the miracle itself, the B element of the chiasmic structure. We can see the kingdom that Jesus proclaims in graphic form through the casting out of evil from the life of this possessed man.

It is significant that this first miracle involves the casting out of a demon, whom Jesus rebukes with authority and then sends on its way. The struggle that began in the desert in 1:12–13 continues here, but Mark makes clear who has the upper hand. Jesus is defeating Satan in the great battle of the end-time. However, Mark reinterprets the apocalyptic tradition here. The battle is not fought throughout the cosmos

with the sun, moon, and stars falling from the sky. The battle is of cosmic proportions, but it takes place within the human heart. God's re-creation not only involves a new heaven and earth, but first and foremost it re-creates the landscape of the human spirit and makes human life whole.

Finally, with regard to this first miracle, the text raises the question of Jesus' identity for the first time. The demon knows who Jesus is, but Jesus quickly silences him. The crowds are left in amazement. The question of the identity of Jesus will continue to be an issue in this gospel. Why Jesus seems to hide his identity is not yet apparent. We will have to wait for more evidence in later chapters to address it.

Mark continues with miracle stories to show us how God reshapes the human landscape through the work of his Son, Jesus. Jesus next encounters Peter's mother-in-law, who is suffering with a fever. Jesus simply takes her by the hand and helps her rise. It is a very short story, but it has three important themes that are worth the reader's attention. First, Jesus performs this second miracle for the sake of a woman. Throughout the gospel Mark tries to balance male and female when he shows how the power of the kingdom of God is at work. In the kingdom of God distinctions made on the basis of gender are not valid. God works equally through all, in all, and for all. Secondly, Jesus helps the woman rise. The quiet reference to the resurrection, where the promises of the kingdom will be fully realized, is no accident. Through her healing, which restores her to wholeness, the woman experiences a small foretaste of the resurrection. Finally, Peter's mother-in-law rises and begins to serve others. Again, we have a very quick phrase that alludes to a major theme of discipleship in this gospel. The disciple serves. To enter into the kingdom and to embrace its dreams means to serve. Later Mark will expand and further explore this theme of service, for it is one of the keys to the mystery of the kingdom. For now, we simply see that someone touched by the promises of the kingdom begins to use the life that they have been given for the sake of service to others.

Having shown us these two miracles, Mark now moves to his summary statement in 1:32–34. This summary takes these first two miracles and tells us that things like this were happening in great numbers. Mark wants his readers to note how widely the conflict between the kingdoms

of God and Satan rages, and how great the victory of God is. He pictures Jesus' ministry in Galilee as a triumphant march (*parousia*) in which the kingdom of God touches numerous lives and transforms them. In Isaiah 40 the prophet's vision of the victorious march of God in a new exodus emphasized God's re-creating the physical earth for the sake of his people; Mark, on the other hand, sees Galilee flowering with the results of God's re-creation of human life. Mark continues to locate the eschatological action of God within the human realm. He also stresses the widespread success of Jesus' proclamation. In 1:37 Simon tells Jesus that everyone is looking for him. It is a way of saying, "the whole world has been waiting for this." Human dreams from time immemorial come to fruition in the work of Jesus. Jesus responds by moving out to other towns so that the re-creative march of God's kingdom may spread further.

The chapter closes with another detailed miracle story in which Jesus cures a leper. The leper not only has a physical disability because of his disease, he also has spiritual, communal, and personal problems. Leprosy marred a person physically with skin sores; it also made him or her ritually unclean and communally untouchable. Lepers were forced to live outside of human settlements, often in cemeteries, away from family and friends. Because of this ritually imposed exile, they were to some extent already dead socially. Leprosy also was a sign of one's alienation from God. The people of Jesus' time had no good medical explanation for this disease. They saw it as a result of the anger of God at some sin the victim must have committed. As a punishment, leprosy made the victim ritually unclean and hence unfit for temple worship. Finally, the disease must have destroyed a person's self-image. Rejected by God, excluded from their community, required to wear a bell to warn people away, the leper's self-esteem must have been very low. Imagine trying to walk around downtown in any of our cities ringing a bell and crying out for people to stay away because you had a dreaded disease. After a few hours of seeing yourself reflected in the fearful eyes of others, your image of yourself would quickly turn negative, and you might wish you could exist far from the community of others.

The healing of this leper restores not only the man's health but also his relationship with God, makes him welcome again in the community, and helps him see himself as valued and loved by God. Closing this

first section of the gospel, the story of the leper shows that the kingdom of God re-creates human life in all of its dimensions. This gospel contains many miracle stories, most of them about the healing of bodies. From the very first, Mark tells us to look not only at the physical dimension of healing, but also at the re-creation and making whole of all the dimensions of human life. This miracle also repeats several of the themes we have already seen. Jesus' authority is reaffirmed ("If you will to do so, you can cure me"). Jesus overcomes the evil that plagues human life and has trapped us in the present impasse. And the secretiveness of Jesus about his identity appears again ("see that you tell no one anything"). The story closes with Mark's emphasizing that the effects and message of the kingdom are becoming so well known that Jesus can no longer move about publicly. The last word in this opening movement of the gospel is that of the kingdom's immeasurable success in Galilee.

### **Reflections in Front of the Text**

The world in which we live is not simply an objective reality that stands hard and fast over against human experience. It is not merely the sum of all things that exist, a cosmic environment for human life. Our world is an interpreted reality. Human beings transcend every possible environment and create for themselves worlds of meaning through which they integrate all that they encounter into a meaningful whole. The world of the Greek city-state with its participative forms of civic life differed greatly from the world of the ancient Near Eastern despotism of the Persian Empire.

The world of eleventh-century Europe, dominated by feudal lords and monasteries, was a very different time and place from the world of the twentieth-century, which was dominated by a technological imagination and corporate interests. The worlds in which human life takes place are correlative realities. The things that catch our attention mirror the questions humans deem worth asking; the things we value reflect what reality reveals of itself to us in a particular world. The ancient Greeks sought a principle of unity and explanation beneath the manifoldness of life, and they became philosophers. The Romans asked how they could manage their physical and social environment, and in doing

so they became great engineers and legislators. People living in the eleventh-century looked at the world symbolically and asked how the things that filled their lives spoke of something more, the things of God. They became monks and nuns and theologians.

Imagination and images structure our worlds. Our imaginations free us from a simple stimulus-response relationship to the environment so that we begin to ask what reality means and what is possible for human life. Certain images become key to the worlds we construct. They shape our perception and understanding. They guide our anticipations and longings. They forge our desires and wills. Examples abound in contemporary culture. After September 11, 2001, the American flag took on greater significance than before to the people of the United States. It spoke to us of our unity as a people in the face of the attack on our homeland, and it became a symbol of our resolve to seek justice and ensure the security of our people. Advertising abounds with symbols. An advertisement for an automobile does not just tell us about the car. It tells us what we can become if we own it. It shapes our desires. The picture of an astronaut standing on the surface of the moon speaks to us of our technological achievements and calls us to further exploration of the universe.

Mark's first box containing the mystery of the kingdom quickly attracts the eye. It is brightly painted and its themes of hope appeal to the reader. In this first section of his gospel Mark invites us into a different world of meaning than the one we now know. He engages our imaginations so that we might see reality differently and new possibilities in life might emerge. He reshapes our perception and understanding and guides our longings into new paths. He wants us to dream with the prophets of old. He offers us hope. The central symbol of this new world is the kingdom of God. In the stories he tells us of Jesus, Mark offers us images of that new world that can fire our imaginations.

Hope is made possible by the imagination, which sees things that are not yet realized and reaches for them. This first section of Mark's gospel seeks to awaken hope and shape the imaginations of God's people. To do this Mark always keeps an eye on the proclamation of the kingdom of God in 1:14–15. This is the heart of the matter. The task of the gospel is to call people to hope. Given the fact that Mark sees the kingdom as already impinging on the world, he does not proclaim some far distant

future hope. The kingdom is possible now because God is at work in his Son Jesus now. Mark has a proleptic view of the kingdom. Its fullness may lie in the future, but its power and its possibilities are with us even now.

For Mark the end of time and the closing of this world's history were very near. Two thousand years later we have a different perspective on time. The end may not be as near as some early Christians thought. But the creative tension between the end-time and the present is alive even now with possibilities. For example, in the midst of a world of conflict that has its roots in the great inequalities of our social and economic lives, the kingdom offers a vision of justice rooted in respect for the dignity of every human individual realized in community. Jesus does not brush off anyone because his status has already been defined by the prejudices of his time. He treats the leper with respect. That respect in itself is healing. Jesus does not simply dismiss the man possessed by evil because those around him have already classified him as a sinner. So too we can find the courage to face the prejudices of our society that so often write off people because of their economic status, their gender, or their race. We can look for the good in those whose sins may have harmed us, and find room for forgiveness. We can look for economic opportunities for those who are seen as losers in the great game of capitalism. The world can be a very different place if God is at work in it through his son, Jesus.

Secondly, Mark depicts the kingdom as already transforming people's lives through exorcisms and healing. At first glance these are not everyday occurrences in our churches. Exorcism seems to have become the domain of Hollywood, and Christian congregations rarely feel the need for an exorcism, much less actually experience one. But they do struggle with evil in their own hearts and in the world in which they work, play and enjoy their lives. Sin is both individual and social. It warps and distorts the heart of each person, and it corrupts and perverts the lives of institutions great and small. Sin is both a question of particular acts and a matter of basic attitudes and fundamental patterns out of which individual acts emerge.

Sin and evil can possess us. One can see this in two fundamental flaws of our society—its excessive individualism and its consumerism. These two fundamental habits of the heart shape our lives as individu-

als as well as the fundamental patterns of our corporations and our government's decisions. They define how we see the world and what is possible and desirable in life. The gospel gives us the power of hope so that we can name the evil that comes from excessive individualism and consumerism. The gospel helps us recognize that Christ has already conquered these evils and that a better world is possible.

Thus the proclamation of the kingdom as the conquest of Satan and evil is a message of great hope. Jesus has defeated what seems to possess us and trap us in patterns that destroy life. We are free. The gospel proclaims that we are caught up in a new Exodus, a re-creation of the human landscape. The power of God at work in Jesus, conquering evil, provides the key to the story of Jesus' wrestling with Satan in the desert, and it also stands out in the first miracle of Jesus in which he simply assumes command of the evil spirit and tells it to be gone. Jesus has won the victory over evil, and he controls the field of battle. The preacher and the reader of the gospel have a great opportunity to name the evils we struggle with and echo the words of Jesus, "Be gone."

The Christian community does not experience dramatic physical healings as part of the everyday stuff of our lives. But healing should be central to our Christian experience. The kingdom of God promises us wholeness of life. Mark paints a much broader picture of the healing work of Jesus than what we see in its most dramatic occurrences. Healing involves more than the physical and the individual. The healing of the leper, which Mark places in the key position as the final story of this section, invites us to consider how healing can also touch our social relationships, our relationship with God, and even our fundamental sense of ourselves. Healing always restores us to the community that is the kingdom of God.

Third, hope is not wishful thinking. The call for change and trust in the good news summons us to conversion today. That conversion is not simply a matter of beliefs that we hold to be true or a change in how we act. It means changing our way of being in the world. It involves a profound shift in how we see the world and what is possible in life. It affects how we understand ourselves, our relationships, the institutions within which we carry out our lives, and the basic patterns that structure our lives. It alters our sense of ourselves and of what it means to be human.

It changes the images we use to understand God. God, who approaches us out of the future, re-creates, heals, and delivers us from evil.

### **Key Points for Preaching**

This section of Mark's gospel calls preachers to awaken hope in their hearers and reshape the imaginations of God's people. In doing so, they are wise never to lose sight of the central proclamation of this section of the gospel and the gospel as a whole in 1:14–15. The kingdom of God is at hand. Its dreams are possible. Every story in this section of the gospel in one way or another draws out the implications of that centerpiece. The homilist has the wonderful opportunity to invite people to dream and live the possibilities of those dreams. For "we are such stuff as dreams are made on" (William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV,i.).

This first section of Mark gives the homilist the chance to reflect on the power of God present in the community in the work of Jesus. A new creation and a new exodus are taking place. We are free and God is at work recreating the landscape of human life. With the power of Jesus who has conquered Satan in the desert the homilist can invite the community to name the evils that plague God's people and command them to be gone. The community can enter the struggle to leave an old world behind and live in the light of the promises of something new. The power of God at work in the kingdom can make all aspects of our lives whole. Mark's gospel has many healing stories. All of them are more than just physical. All of them bear the promise of this multi-dimensional healing. So too the power of God can heal our relationships, our sense of our selves, and our relationship with God beyond our wildest imagination.

In reflecting on this section of Mark, the homilist has the opportunity to picture a world shaped by the future that God holds out to us and ask what it means to live as if that future were truly possible. How would we live if justice for all people really could be attained and if God had created the world so that there are enough goods that all may live well? How would we live if forgiveness were really possible? How would I see myself if God sees a goodness within that is worth healing? How would we deal with our hurts and disappointments if forgiveness can

heal our relationships? What does it mean to live as if peace were possible in the world and in our hearts? Preaching the first section of Mark opens a world of possibilities to the congregation.

Finally, Mark's concern to overcome gender and racial bias ought to mark our preaching. In this first section Mark carefully balances the stories of the realization of God's promises for a man and a woman. Later in the third chapter the list of regions from which people come to hear Jesus and to be touched by the power of God at work through him includes Jewish as well as Gentile lands. As far as Mark is concerned, the kingdom does not discriminate in any way on the basis of race or gender. The world our homilies envision ought not to be touched by such biases either. Our language ought to be inclusive. Sexism and racism ought to be among those social patterns of sin that we proclaim Jesus has conquered.