

Discipleship in Process

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Mark

The Gospel of Mark, more than the other Gospels, highlights the ignorance, weakness, and selfishness of the disciples. This comes despite the many good things Mark has to say about them, including their response to Jesus' initial call.

Certain incidents and narrative devices develop this portrait. One is the repetition of boat scenes, which parallel one another in emphasizing the disciples' inability to truly comprehend Jesus' power and authority. The last boat scene is closely followed by the unusual two-stage healing of a blind man, which may function as a kind of narrative metaphor for the only partial vision of the disciples regarding Jesus. Then follows Peter's confession of Christ, with his dramatic moment of insight followed immediately by Satanic blindness on the apostle's part. The disciples' limited grasp of Jesus' identity is matched by their limited grasp of his message. They continue to desire power and status. Jesus challenges them several times for their failure to recognize that following him requires a fundamental attitude of self-sacrifice. More obviously, of course, the disciples desert Jesus at the time of his arrest and trial. The juxtaposition of Peter's threefold denial with the death of Jesus throws the cowardice and courage of the two men, respectively, into sharper relief.

Yet Peter and the others will go on to lead the church effectively. The angel who speaks to the women following the resurrection gives them a message to the disciples (and Peter is singled out!), promising a further encounter with the resurrected Jesus. The disciples will be very different following this encounter, a fact that Mark does not explore but that is well developed in Acts, so that the resurrection is the key event in effecting such change.

What relevance does this have to work? Simply and obviously, that as disciples of Jesus with our own work to do, we are imperfect and in process. There will be a good deal that we will be required to repent of, attitudes that will be wrong and will need to change.

Significantly, we must recognize that, like the disciples, we may well be wrong in much of what we believe and think, even about gospel matters. On a daily level, then, we must prayerfully reflect on how we are embodying the reign of God and prepared to show repentance over our deficiencies in this regard. We may feel tempted to portray ourselves as righteous, wise, and skilled in our workplaces, as a witness to Jesus' righteousness, wisdom, and excellence. But it would be a more honest and more powerful witness to portray ourselves as we really are—fallible and somewhat self-centered works-in-process, evidence of Jesus' mercy more than demonstrators of his character. Our witness is then to invite our co-workers to grow along with us in the ways of God, rather than to become like

us. Of course, we need to exercise ourselves rigorously to growth in Christ. God's mercy is not an excuse to be complacent in our sin.