

Thursday in the Sixth Week after the Epiphany

February 11, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year One: *Genesis 2:18–25; Psalm 128; Mark 7:24–30*

In his *An Introduction to the New Testament*, the late Raymond Brown describes the evangelist known as Mark's seventh chapter as "A controversy over ritual purity."¹ On Tuesday, we heard the beginning of the chapter, where Mark explains to his gentile readers about the Jewish customs associated with food and drink. He notes, "The hard-fought struggles over kosher food attested in Acts and Paul would be difficult to explain if Jesus had settled the issue from the beginning."² Mark is also challenging the piety of Jewish Christians who continue the ritual practices of Jews. The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples walk according to the tradition of the elders?—but they eat bread with impure hands."³ Jesus' response was, "You forsake the commandment of God and hold fast to the tradition of human beings."⁴

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 137.

² Ibid.

³ Mark 7:5. Translation: Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 439. All quotations are from Marcus unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Mark 7:8. Ibid.

The following section, which we didn't hear yesterday because of the commemoration of Saint Scholastica, begins, "And summoning the crowd again [Jesus] said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing from outside of a person which, when it goes into the person, is able to defile him; but the things that come out of the person are the ones that defile the person." Then the evangelist comments on what Jesus said, "(Thus he declared all foods clean.)"⁵ Again to Brown's point, if he had taught this, it would not be controversial after the resurrection.

The evangelist continues with today's gospel lesson. A person of faith and understanding seeks him out. Along with diet, how gentiles assimilate to the Christian community is the other issue that divides the first Christians.⁶ It was in Joel Marcus' commentary on Mark that I first read that this story is "the only example in the Gospels of a person who wins an argument with Jesus."⁷ Matthew and Luke do not bring this episode into their narratives. Marcus speculates that the story may come from the region of Tyre, an area where "Gentile (including perhaps Gentile Christian?) animosity against Jews runs high,

⁵ Mark 7:14–15, *Ibid.*, 440.

⁶ Brown, 137.

⁷ Marcus, 470.

need to be sharply reminded of God’s continuing favor for his ancient people.”⁸ His comment reminds me that Mark wrote during the Great Jewish Revolt, which ends with the destruction of Jerusalem late in the year 73 or early 74—the sources aren’t clear. Despite Jesus using the word “dog” to describe non-Jews in Mark’s narrative, he and his disciples head next to a Gentile region.⁹

I like the stories in Mark where Jesus seems not to know everything—especially the story where he has to ask the blind man on whom he has laid his healing hands, “Do you see anything?”¹⁰ Today’s gospel lesson makes me wonder what stories of Jesus’ interaction with women have been omitted, especially by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Though underplayed by church leaders and teachers, women’s role in John is a prominent one.

Finally, Marcus writes, “The Markan Jesus seems to accept the point of view that the Jews are God’s children, and nowhere else does he deny this identification or transfer it to the Gentiles.”¹¹ He goes

⁸ Ibid., 471.

⁹ Ibid., 476.

¹⁰ Mark 8:23, RSV.

¹¹ Marcus, 460.

on to say, “Children do not cease to be children simply because they disobey their parents’ wishes.”¹² I think it is important for us to try never to forget that, to quote from a collect in Daily Morning Prayer, “God made of one blood all the peoples of the earth.”¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 100.