

A MARKAN BASE FOR IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT

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You are perhaps familiar with this striking image of Ignatius which depicts him in cassock, as he would have been in his later years, but leaning forward eagerly, as if pressing ahead against a keen wind. It's subtitled, "Ignatius on the way". That's a very Markan description, if I might say so, because St. Mark, in his Gospel, constantly portrays Jesus 'on the way'. And the well-known tendency of this evangelist to preface the adverb "immediately" before almost every fresh action in the Gospel lends to his portrayal of Jesus the kind of breathless pressing-on, of urgency communicated so effectively by the statue of Ignatius. So, that representation of Ignatius has stimulated me to reflect at some length upon points of contact

between the Markan Gospel and Ignatian spirituality, with specific reference to the area of discernment, which is your overall focus these days.

Discernment has a lot to do with freedom – detecting where I am and am not free to respond to God’s call.

Mark’s Gospel is also a proclamation of freedom, not an easy freedom but a freedom to be won by following Jesus along his costly way. It is freedom, specifically, from the demonic – something which I shall discuss at greater length in due course. So I should like to put to you the thesis of a convergence between Mark’s Gospel and Ignatian spirituality in this mutual concern with freedom.

Let’s consider the Spiritual Exercises for a while. Ignatius describes them at the start as “every manner of preparing and disposing a soul to rid itself of all ill-ordered attachments, and once rid of them, to seek and find the will of God in the order of one’s life for the salvation of the soul” (Annotation 1); or “to conquer oneself and to set one’s life in order, without being influenced by any attachment which is ill-ordered” (Heading, §21) . Freedom from “ill-ordered attachments” is perhaps a rather bleak description for our 21st century ears. Without being unfaithful to Ignatius, I think we could describe the Exercises as designed to help the persons who makes them to undergo a personal experience of God’s grace at such depth as to free them to choose freely the way and pattern of life to which God is calling them, in accordance with their own deepest desires.

St Ignatius would clearly adhere to Augustine's celebrated confession: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you". But St. Ignatius also knew that discovering the pure vein of that deepest desire for God within our hearts and aligning our lives with it meant hacking, if that is not an inappropriate word, through a jungle of fears, doubts, multiple aspects of selfishness and attachments: all of which bar the way and hold us captive. We need to be free from these in order to tap the source of our deepest freedom: the capacity to respond to God's invitation to the Banquet of the Kingdom.

When I use that kind of language I admit I'm stepping out of the text of the Spiritual Exercises and back into the imagery of the Gospels. But recently I'm come to think that it's not wrong to associate the biblical invitation to the Kingdom with the meditation—or whatever we should call it—that heads the Exercises: The "First Principle and Foundation". As a statement of theology it too is pretty bald and bleak: "The human person was created to praise, reverence and serve God and by this means to save his or her soul ..." What about loving God, which Jesus says is the First Commandment? Well, of course, love sweeps in overwhelmingly in the final meditation: the Contemplation for Obtaining Love and Ignatius surely has that in mind from the start. I think he formulates the First Principle in that stark way because the focus of the Exercises is going to be upon decision-making and theological considerations that could distract from that are stripped away. Nonetheless, I think it is right to see behind it all the biblical vision encapsulated in Jesus'

proclamation: “The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15). The paramount image of the Kingdom in the Gospels is that of a **banquet**: God’s whole desire in regard to human beings is to have us as honoured guests at a marvellous banquet, foreshadowed in the hospitality Jesus himself put on for the multitudes and also by the Eucharist. Jesus’ job—and that of the Church—is to spread the good news about that and issue the invitations. The goal of the Exercises is to assist people to be free to respond as fully as possible personally to that invitation and to discern where and how God might be calling me to join Jesus’ mission of realizing that divine project as widely as possible in the human sphere: that is, to serve, alongside the One who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The Spiritual Exercises, as we know, have a certain content—a programme of meditations and of contemplations based largely upon Scripture. While this content is set before the retreatant to pray and consider, there is also—and more importantly—a dynamic at work: the dynamic of reflection upon the experience of prayer that is continually assessed by the director and the retreatant with the aid of the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. In many ways, this process of discernment is the most important thing in the whole experience—and the content is, in the interests of the well-known pragmatism of Ignatius, subservient to it.

It is connection with this process of discernment and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits that he drew up to assist it that Ignatius, speaks of the

influence of the good and the bad spirit. Ignatius never identifies the bad spirit with Satan or the Devil. In fact, he speaks very little of Satan at all – only under the name “Lucifer” in the highly evocative meditation on The Two Standards.¹ What Ignatius is indicating through the language of the good spirit and the bad spirit is that human beings exist under the tug of two contrary impulses, the one calling to life and freedom under the prompting of grace, a calling that is not without cost, as it involves, losing one’s life with Christ in order to gain it; the contrary impulse is to selfishness, alienation, and captivity, usually under the deceptive guise of some good. The whole point of the Spiritual Exercises is to place a person in a situation of “withdrawal” or “retreat” from everyday life, and the preoccupations and concerns that for the most insulate us from our deeper selves. It is in such a situation of retreat that those two opposing forces and their interplay can be most palpably felt, recognised and assessed in a pedagogy of discernment, leading, it may be hoped, to a deeper commitment and deeper contentment along a direction of life chosen for me by God. This is, as I have said, the dynamic aspect of the Spiritual Exercises, which the content is intended to serve.

So much for the time being about the Spiritual Exercises. Let me turn now to St. Mark and the sense of freedom which this gospel proclaims. One of the difficulties of teaching Mark – especially as an introductory NT text – stems from its constant presentation of Jesus in conflict with the demonic.

¹ Cf. David M. Stanley, *The Call to Discipleship. Way Supplement 43/44* (January 1982) 109-10.

The conflict is joined in the very first public act of Jesus and continues, albeit more and more subtly, to the end. The opening confrontation with a demon-possessed person in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-28) is only the first of four explicit exorcisms in the gospel, while exorcisms also feature strongly in Mark's frequent summary statements of Jesus ministry. I once heard the great German exegete Ernst Käsemann characterize Mark's gospel as one whole exorcism from beginning to end.

The prominence of Jesus' confrontation with the demonic in Mark means that it is something that any interpretation of the gospel has to take very seriously. To be sure, the demonic is part of a larger picture, the apocalyptic worldview pervasive in Judaism of the time. But one cannot simply extract a "pure essence" of the gospel from that wider framework and leave the rest behind. A valid interpretation will have to ask, what can we make of the demonic in our understanding today. We cannot simply say, Oh well, cases of genuine demonic possession – the kind of thing depicted in the film, *The Exorcist* – are comparatively rare. If we were to understand the exorcisms recorded in Mark solely in terms of those extreme cases, then we should have to conclude that Palestine in Jesus' day was a pervasively devil-ridden society in a very overt way. Yet there is no reason to suppose that it was any more so than any other society, ancient or modern, including our own. We have to recognise that the ancient world, including Jewish Palestine, attributed to demonic control many conditions that modern medicine and psychology would ascribe to various pathologies of a psycho-physical nature.

We have to ask, then, about an understanding of the demonic that can cover a whole range of conditions. Can we find the “essence” of the demonic for Mark that will enable us to relate it to our present situation and so find an understanding of the gospel stories that is relevant and applicable to our own time and condition?

More particularly, the question I am putting before you this morning is: can we relate Mark’s sense of freedom from the captivity to the demonic to the Ignatian project of freedom from the inordinate attachments that prevent a person giving themselves in freedom and joy to the cause of God – the captivity that Ignatius assigned to the bad spirit?

Having put that question, let me offer a few more reflections on the demonic in Mark. Over many years of reflecting upon and teaching the gospel, I have concluded that the essence of the demonic has to do with control. People in the ancient world generally and the biblical world in particular spoke of demonic possession when they felt themselves held captive from within by forces and compulsions over which they had no control – transpersonal forces which robbed them of freedom of choice, stunted their human growth, alienating them from God, from life in community and from their own individual humanity. We perhaps should think of similar “captivities” – personal, social, economic – under which people of our own day labour and which they seem powerless to control or escape. The multiple forms of addiction which burden us as individuals and

societies come particularly to mind – huge transpersonal forces that control and make people their slaves.

The sense that the world, including Israel, has fallen under demonic control is pervasive in the horizon of discourse presupposed in Mark's Gospel. Along with many strands of Judaism at the time, the early followers of Jesus and presumably Jesus himself, read the great announcements of liberation contained in the latter half of the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 40-66), not in respect to freedom from exile in Babylon – their original reference – but in relation to freedom from this captivity to the demonic in all its multiple manifestations. The very word "gospel", which became so significant for the New Testament writers, has its origin here (in a verbal form) in a cluster of magnificent "good news" passages made especially memorable to us by George Frederick Handel's *Messiah*.

Get you up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of **good news**;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of **good news**,
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Here is your God!" (Isa 40:9)

and

How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
 who brings **good news**,
 who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isa 52:7).

The “good news” or “gospel” is essentially about freedom: release of captives, homecoming, the reign or rule of Israel’s God. Not only from the New Testament but also from other Jewish literature at the time, notably the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that these passages from Second Isaiah were being read in relation to the liberation which faithful Israelites of this time longed for: freedom from the demonic in all its manifestations in association with the onset of the Kingdom or Rule of God.

This explains the rather curious way in which Mark’s gospel begins.² The opening verse (1:1) reads: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. Mark seems to want to indicate the appearance and preaching of John the Baptist (vv 4-8) as the “beginning” of the good news: that is, as the first instalment and necessary preliminary to the liberation that is the subject of the “good news”. Mark does not, however, immediately describe the appearance of John but opens with a scriptural quotation attributed to Isaiah:

- 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
- 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
- 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of
repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

² I’ve only become very conscious of this in recent months since reading a very stimulating study of Mark (*Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*) by a scholar, originally from New Zealand but now a rising star in the United States, called Rikki Watts.

It would have been more normal, I think, to have described the appearance of John first and then to have indicated that this appearance is the fulfilment of scripture. Second, the first part of the quotation (v 2bc), though attributed by Mark to Isaiah, is not in fact from Isaiah at all but comes from Exod 23:20, with some influence also from Mal 3:1.

Mark regularly receives a scholarly rap over the knuckles for this “false” attribution to Isaiah—something which Matthew and Luke avoid.³ But to regard the attribution of the whole to Isaiah as due to carelessness or ignorance on Mark’s part is misguided. It fails to note the significance of Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 40-55, as “carrier” of the hopes for the messianic age. It was tremendously important to recognize that the promises carried by the Isaiah texts were being fulfilled. The scriptural text is out in front and everything is attributed to Isaiah, including, of course, the element (v 3) that really is from Isaiah about the “voice” crying out in the wilderness (40:3), to show that the appearance of John signals the setting in motion of the long-awaited divine intervention that Isaiah foretold.

What binds the composite quotation together is, of course, the term “way” (Greek hodos), common to all three texts (Exod 20:23; Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3). In the Markan context “the way” is not the “way” across the desert, as in

³ Matthew and Luke both omit here (Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4) the Exod 23:20/Mal 3:1 part of the quotation, beginning immediately and “correctly” with Isa 40:3. The Exod 23:20/Mal 3:1 text, without specific attribution occurs in another context: Jesus words about John (Matt 11:10; John 7:27).

Isaiah's original prophecy of homecoming, but the repentant human heart that it is John's role to create in the people in preparation for the advent of the Kingdom or Rule of God.

Let us linger for a moment on this aspect of "repentance" that is central to the proclamation of John, as it will also be to that of Jesus: "The time has come; the rule of God is at hand; repent and give yourselves in faith to the good news" (1:15). The Greek word behind "repent" has the sense of "change one's mind or heart". The Hebrew equivalent is even more interesting. Hebrew is a very concrete language, often lacking more abstract terms. The same word, shûb has to do for both "turn around", "return", and also "repent". Repentance involves not just sorrow for sin and freedom from its claims but turning around and rediscovering one's own true humanity, where one is truly at home with one's deepest self and with the God, who, in Augustine's sense is to be found there. I would relate this aspect of "repentance" very closely to the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, which, as you know, is primarily designed to create conversion at depth.

But let us pursue just a little longer the prologue of Mark's Gospel, specifically the second part of the Baptist's proclamation (vv 7-8):

7 He proclaimed, "The one who is stronger than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The full import of John's pointing to and description of Jesus as "the Stronger One" becomes clear when later in the gospel we hear Jesus applying to

himself a very striking image. In controversy with the scribes over the source of his power to drive out demons, he portrays himself as burglar able to enter the house of a “strong man” (Satan), bind him and plunder his house (3:27).

23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ...

26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

27 But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

The image presupposes that the “house” of the world has fallen into the grip of the “Strong One,” Satan. Jesus, by virtue of his endowment with the Spirit, is the “Stronger One,” come to bind up Satan (through his exorcisms) and “plunder” his “house” in the sense of reclaiming human lives and human society for the freedom and humanity associated with the reign of God. This is the primary meaning, I think, of John’s assertion that he will “baptise with the Spirit” (v 8). In Ignatian terms, he will bring about that human lives come under the liberating influence of the good spirit rather than the deceptive, captivating—in the negative sense—control of the bad.

The following scene of Jesus’ baptism and endowment with the Spirit (vv 9-11) plays out John’s prediction. Jesus makes his first appearance in the gospel as one who, along with a mass of repentant Israelites, comes to John for baptism. To all outward appearance he is simply one of that repentant crowd. It is what happens next that sets him apart: the “rending” of the heavens; the descent of the Spirit, in the form of a dove; and the assurance of

the Father from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well-pleased” (vv 10-11). This is a truly Trinitarian moment – when, so to speak, the Trinity opens its arms in a playing out of the inner intimacy of the Godhead that takes place not in remote heaven but here, in this concrete place, on earth. This sense of divine assurance, palpable in the Spirit, is the beginning and driving force of Jesus’ mission. It is what makes him the Stronger One, able to reclaim human lives for the Kingdom – and not only to reclaim them from captivity but to draw them into the same divine intimacy, where in association with him they enjoy a familial relationship with God.

The final element of the Prologue is Mark’s brief but powerfully evocative account of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness:

- 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.
 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Spirit, which had been the assurance of the Father’s love, now acts with violence, “driving” Jesus out into the wilderness (vv 12-13). The love and the violence are not at odds. Rather, the divine love impels Jesus to begin the contest with Satan that is the negative presupposition for the coming of God’s Rule, and the liberation of human lives associated with it. Before displacing Satan in the public realm, in the exorcisms, etc. that are to come, Jesus first goes right into his habitual realm, the wilderness, to engage at a personal level the conflict with Satan that he will later prosecute on a public and social scale.

Regarding this scene I can do no better than quote an excellent spiritual text by two local scholars:

In the Bible, the wilderness is a place associated with supernatural powers, a place of angels and demons, where we encounter God and our deepest selves without masks or pretence. In Mark, particularly, the wilderness has cosmic overtones. It is set apart from the ordinary structures of life, radically open to the transcendent. What happens to us in the ‘wilderness’ of our lives somehow determines what happens everywhere else.⁴

The wilderness is a laboratory for discernment. One is alone with one’s own humanity, the call of God and the tug of those anti-God forces that seek to divert one from that call and so frustrate the mission that stems from it. Jesus, who has just identified with the sinful human condition by entering the waters of Jordan for baptism, now enters into it even more deeply by exposing himself to the full force of the Satanic attack.

Let us pause and set this consideration of Mark more intentionally within an Ignatian perspective. As you are aware, the First major element of the Spiritual Exercises, the exercises of the “First Week”, are designed simply to promote a conversion experience in the most profound degree. They are about “repentance” in the fullest sense of the Markan proclamation.

Undergoing this initial experience of conversion is for Ignatius the necessary and irreplaceable condition for going any further. Both as a scripture scholar and a believer today, I must confess that I don’t very much like the kind of

⁴ Dorothy A. Lee and John Honner, *Wisdom and Demons: Meditations on Scripture* (Melbourne: Aurora/David Lovell, 1993) 57.

material that Ignatius in those exercises of the First Week sets before the retreatant as a means, under God's grace, to conversion. At another level, though, when we look at the grace Ignatius asks the retreatant to pray for, I think we are in fact much closer to the biblical and specifically Markan sense of repentance: of being amazed and radically grasped by a sense of the divine mercy, and of the sense of liberation and freedom that comes from that realisation. In this sense sin is not so much an offence for which forgiveness is sought – though it is that to some extent – but rather a captivity from which one longs to be set free.

My understanding is that it is this last sense of sin that is emphasized in giving the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises today and it is here, too, that I think we return to the sense of repentance characteristic of Mark. The retreatant is not simply alone with his or her naked humanity and nothing else. One goes into that personal wilderness with Jesus, who has gone there before and is still the companion.⁵ One goes there, knowing that in association with him, the words spoken after his baptism, address us as well: "You are my beloved son/daughter, in whom I am well pleased".

As I pointed out above, it is surely significant that the very first public act of Jesus that Mark describes is liberation of a man possessed by a demon in the course of his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28).

⁵ The recurrent Colloquy to Jesus on the cross (Spiritual Exercises §§53-54) gives expression to this christological dimension.

What is very noteworthy here is the response of the congregation who have witnessed the event:

27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!

He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

The audience seem to be equally struck by the authority (exousia) of Jesus’ teaching as by the exorcism, which has just taken place so dramatically before their eyes. The narrative suggests a strict continuity between Jesus’ teaching and his freeing people from demonic power. In his teaching Jesus is banishing a false or inadequate image of God (cf. 1:15) – something that we all know can be genuinely oppressive in a religious context. This Markan link between teaching and exorcism, to my mind, agrees with the strongly pedagogical emphasis in the Spiritual Exercises. The retreatant, like Ignatius in his pilgrim years, is learning wisdom for life.

The most dramatic exorcism in the Gospel – one that I see as true paradigm of liberation for Mark – occurs when Jesus, having calmed the storm at sea, lands on the shore in the land of the Gerasenes (5:1) and is immediately confronted by a most violent and powerful demon. Mark’s description of the man possessed by the demon is graphic and prolonged:

2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;

4 for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

We have here the very image of social isolation and self-destructiveness, a person whom no one could “bind”, and who lived in the realm of death among the tombs. What a contrast with what the people of the region find, when, following the expulsion of the demon and the headlong plunge of the pigs, they come out to see what all the commotion is about:

15 They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.

They see a perfect image of humanity regained, both in an individual and social sense.

There is so much more to the scene than I can mention in the time available this morning. I just wanted to highlight the way in which this exorcism so powerfully presents Jesus as the one who, binding the demonic through the power of the Spirit, reclaims a person for true humanity – and, in the end, again in congruence with the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises sends the liberated man on mission:

18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him.

19 But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.”

20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

The man is to go to his “home” and to his own people, and share with them the liberation he has experienced. He’s going to lead them in the Retreat in Daily Life.

In these examples we have been considering instances of overt exorcism in the Gospel. But, as I suggested earlier, Jesus is in conflict with the demonic in Mark’s gospel on a far wider and pervasive level. As the narrative of the Gospel proceeds, the demonic is revealed in the hostility of adversaries who bring to his preaching and healing activity, the old wineskins of an understanding of God that is inadequate to the new wine of the Kingdom (2:22).

But as the gospel moves towards its second half, Jesus’ conflict with demonic more and more takes place within the hearts of his closest disciples. At the watershed scene at Caesarea Philippi (8:22-33), in the person of Peter, they try to deter him from pursuing the costly but true direction of his messianic mission:

- 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”
- 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.
- 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.
- 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
- 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

The severe rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan”, unmasks the demonic temptation behind Peter’s suggestion. Under the guise of good – preserving Jesus from suffering – Peter is actually deflecting him from his true path.

One could pursue this more subtle conflict with the demonic right through the second half of the gospel. There is no time to do that this morning. Let me just, in conclusion, indicate two areas in the second half of the gospel that again really chime in, in my view, with the dynamic of discernment in the Ignatian Exercises. In the long journey to Jerusalem that makes up the second half of Mark’s gospel Jesus is principally concerned with teaching his disciples (9:30-32) – that is, exorcising their hearts. In this divine pedagogy two impediments to discipleship stand out and become principal preoccupation. One is ambition and desire to lord it over others in the community. The other is attachment to wealth. Both, to my mind, find their Ignatian resonance in the outline of the strategy of the “wicked chieftain” (Lucifer) in the meditation on the Two Standards (Spiritual Exercises §142), who advises his assistants to ensnare people through the coveting of wealth and then to honour and “unbounded pride”. The remaining exercises of the Second Week, leading up to the Election of the states of life, directly address these two concerns.

There is so much more to indicate – especially in connection with the involvement with the Passion of Jesus that dominates the conclusion of

Mark's Gospel and forms the matter for the final Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. There is matter here for a book perhaps rather than a single talk or article. What I have simply tried to put before you is a kind of hypothesis bringing together the dynamic of the Exercises with Mark's sense of liberation from the demonic. I am now very interested to hear your reactions – especially from those of you who have far more expert knowledge and experience of the Spiritual Exercises than I do myself.

Postscript

While maintaining that an interesting Markan basis can be found for St. Ignatius' sense of the human person as under the 'tug' of two spirits (the good spirit, and the bad), I would want to stress that this is really something for directors. It may not be at all helpful for many retreatants to suggest that their experience of unwelcome controlling forces in their lives has a "demonic" base. I am simply trying to relate the Ignatian explanation of discernment to the pervasive and ever more subtle presentation of the demonic in Mark's Gospel.

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