

The Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel

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It is seen several times in St Mark's Gospel that the fact that Jesus is the Christ, should not be revealed. This arouses doubts in many readers' minds. The concealment of the fact that Jesus is the promised Messiah, is a peculiar feature of Mark's Christology. In the first part of the Gospel (1:14-8:26), the disciples and others do not realize that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the second part (8:27-16:8) following Peter's proclamation of faith they do not understand that he is the suffering Saviour. After he healed the sick, worked miracles, drove out evil spirits and Peter made the proclamation of faith (1:25-44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26-30), Jesus commands them to keep the fact that he is the Messiah a secret.

Even Jesus' family did not understand what his mandate was. "He has gone out of his mind" (3:21), they said. He was rejected in his own home town. (cf: 1-6). The blind Pharisees, unable to understand his mission, conspired to destroy him (3:6). The Apostles, too, were unable to perceive or understand the Messianic secret (6:14-21). It is necessary to find out the reasons for this lack of perception. The Jews considered the Messiah to come, as a Saviour who would be a political deliverer of Israel. Jesus' mission, however, was not political liberation (12:13-17). Jesus was certain that his mission would be misinterpreted.

He, therefore, did not want the fact that he was the Messiah, to be revealed fully, right at the beginning of his public ministry. It would be dangerous to reveal his identity before the fullness of time had come. Since the Israelites, chafing under the yoke of the Roman Empire, were awaiting a political liberator, they desired to crown him as an earthly king. This is clear from St John's Gospel (Jn 6:14-15). Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (cf. Jn. 18:36).

The mission given to Jesus by the Father was completed only through the sacrifice of the Cross and his resurrection. Until that glorious time, no man fully acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. Until the sacrifice of Golgotha takes place, the Evangelists keep the fact of Jesus being the Messiah, a secret.

Like an efficient teacher, Jesus reveals to his disciples that he is the Messiah who has to suffer very much, only stage by stage. A sudden revelation about the suffering Christ would only create a scandal among the disciples. That Peter could not even think of a suffering Christ is a case in point (cf Mk 8:32).

It is only on the occasion of Jesus' crucifixion, that the Roman centurion looks at him and says, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). The Evangelist's purpose is to teach that only in the light of the resurrection and through the eyes of faith can the disciples perceive the secret of Jesus' identity (cf. Mk 9:9; Acts 2:36).

The Disciples Do Not Grasp The Messianic Secret.

It is clear that the disciples of Jesus fail to understand his teachings, particularly those on the suffering Christ, on several occasions. This is evident in what happens after the revelation of the three prophecies on the passion and resurrection. Peter's words after the first prophecy were intended to turn Jesus away from suffering. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him" (8:32).

But Jesus reproached the head of the Apostles and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). "Satan", here means opponent. Peter on this occasion, is turning into an opponent who cannot grasp the meaning of Jesus' way of the cross. Jesus immediately makes it clear that his disciples must walk along the way of self denial. "...if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34).

The disciples do not understand the Messianic secret even after the prophecy regarding the passion is made for the second time. "But they did not understand" (9:32), says the Evangelist. Moreover, the events that take place after this prophecy, point to the fact that they do not grasp the depth of the Messianic secret.

When Jesus spoke about his passion, death and resurrection, the disciples were engaged in arguing among themselves who the greatest among them was (cf. 9:34). Jesus then called the twelve and taught them that who ever wanted to be first must be last of all and servant of all (cf. 9:35). The Lord was exhorting them to be meek and humble like a little child.

While Jesus was preparing for his self-emptying, the disciples were desirous of becoming great. This may seem to be a contradiction. They had to learn the way of self-denial and humility. It is only with the coming of the Holy Spirit that they learn these lessons.

It is obvious from the circumstances regarding the third prophecy about the passion, death and resurrection, that the disciples are afraid to journey along the path of the cross (cf. 10:32-34). On this occasion, too, they take a stance which is quite different from that of Christ. This is seen in the request made by the sons of Zebedee.

We see here the desire for one to be seated on the right hand and the other on the left hand of Jesus in glory. They are utterly forgetful of the necessity to drink the cup of suffering and to be baptized with the baptism that Jesus is baptized with. The purpose of Jesus' coming into this world is immediately highlighted. "...the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"(10:45). According to this example set by Jesus, the disciples are called for the work of self-emptying and service of others.

The blind man of Jericho is held up as an example to the disciples who have lost their spiritual insight (cf 10:46-52). In St Mark's Gospel, this event is accorded crucial importance and deep meaning. The blind man, named Bartimaeus, defying the prohibitions laid down by the people, publicly proclaims Jesus as the son of David (the Messiah). In the light of this faith, he begs Jesus to grant him the gift of sight. His deep-seated faith saves him. He receives his sight, follows Jesus on the way of the cross and becomes an authentic disciple.

The "Jesus Prayer," highly popular in the Eastern Churches, is derived from this blind man's plea. It is only when the disciples pray along with this blind man, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me a sinner, "that their spiritual and physical blindness is cured, and they, like Bartimaeus, follow Jesus in the path of self-denial. The blind man at Bethsaida (cf. 8:22-26), Bible scholars aver, is a symbol of the disciples who perceive the Messianic secret gradually. That is why, it is said, he receives his sight in degrees.

Conclusion

To those who still face a problem regarding the Messianic secret, St Mark says: it is only through the means of self -sacrifice that Jesus can be discovered and eternal life attained. Use of brute force by the emperors and kings of Rome cannot ensure salvation and peace. On the contrary, it can be achieved only through the self-annihilation of Jesus on the cross. The Evangelist is making this clear through the Messianic secret. The tendency to run away from the cross-this is a heresy-still prevails.

Every Christian has to follow the great example set by Jesus, discover the meaning of life and salvation in the cross, and perceive that the cross is the will of God. It is only when we realize this truth that the marks of Jesus will be branded on our body (cf. Gal 6:17). We cannot afford to forget that Jesus reigns not from a kingly throne, but from the cross. The words of the apostle, that "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," are still relevant.

Jesus has proved through his resurrection that he has the power to triumph over persecution and oppression and death and bestow on us the kingdom of God. After the event of the resurrection the disciples grasped the meaning of his teaching in depth and believed fully in his divinity. The life-testimony of Sts Peter, Paul, James and Stephen, described in the Acts of the Apostles.