

The hymn, “Be not afraid, I am with you always,” suits the Lectionary for this Sunday. The Lectionary begins with Isaiah 34 telling Israel in exile not to be afraid of those wielding power. Psalm 146, probably begun after the exile, continues in the same vein, urging the Jewish community not to fear human retaliation. The Epistle of James is specific, insisting Christians should ignore the worldly accoutrements of power. Finally, in the Gospel of Mark 7:36, Jesus tells witnesses to his healing not to tell anyone. Such an element of concealment and revelation, within the same episode is frequent in Mark (1:43-45 [healing the leper]; 7:36).¹

Mark 7:31-37 bears resemblance to: (1) Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65), (2) healing of the blind man (Mark 8:22-26), (3) Peter recognizing Jesus as the Christ (Mark 27—33), (4) Jesus before Pilate the first time (Mark 15:1-5). Mark intends the resemblance to help with the interpretation.² In all cases, there is a type of double bind between concealment and revelation, a double bind that seems to continue through the ages into the present. One of the unwritten messages of these Lectionary readings is not to fear the double binds.

The admonition of Jesus about not telling anyone, puts the benefactors and witnesses of Jesus in a double bind, rather like the double bind into which the forthcoming changes in the Lectionary put the Faithful. Throughout the ages, new translations bring new questions. Did Jesus really say that? If he did, how did he mean it? Is a later generation going to find some hidden misunderstanding, as happened with the case of Galileo? By then, will it be too late to alleviate past suffering? The hidden message in Mark is not to fear the suffering, which comes with lack of understanding. Lack of understanding does not mean lack of love.

When James 2:2 describes the human attributes of power, “a man with gold rings and fine clothes,” he is relating the Faithful to authority and their own organization. James 2:1-5 is the opening of the body of the Epistle, James 2:1—5:6.³ The Christian assembly in the Greek for James 2:2 is the synagogue. Eventually, the notion of synagogue turns into church to distinguish Christians from Jews. The authority that James 2:1 does respect, “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” does not necessarily appear as a powerful figure. Jesus does not appear as a powerful figure, unless one prioritizes loving truth over loving politics. That is the message of these readings, not to fear the truth and not to fear organizing the Church.

¹ Harry Fleddermann, “*And He Wanted to Pass by Them*” (Mark 6:48c), the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 45, No. 3 (July 1983) 390.

² Mary Ann Beavis, “The Trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65): Reader Response and Greco-Roman Readers,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 4 (October 1987) 582, 590, 591.

³ Timothy B. Cargal, review of Patrick J. Hartin, James, in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 649; James Swetnam, S.J., review of Emilio Salvatore, “*E vedeva a distanza ogni cosa*”: *Il racconto della guarigione del cieco di Betsaida*,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 668.

To quote the reviewer of The Epistle of James by Luke Leuk Cheung—James 2:1-26, of which the Lectionary James 2:1-5 is a part, concerns “The testing of the Genuineness of Faith—Obedience to the Royal Law.” In other words, James does respect legitimate authority, even in this passage the Lectionary uses.⁴ Loving truth legitimates authority that prioritizes such love. The Faithful, therefore, are not to fear authority. The Faithful are encouraged to legitimate authority with truth.

Prioritizing truth over politics is what First Isaiah 34:4 means when he writes that the LORD “comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.” First Isaiah sees political storm clouds approaching. Isaiah 34 counsels Israel not to fear the future coming storm. Isaiah puts the coming problems in the future tense.

With G. Strecker, Mary Ann Beavis questions any symbolic relationship between Isaiah 35:5-6 and Mark 37, about the deaf hearing and the dumb speaking, a symbolism the Lectionary seems to imply. The problem is that the disciples do not understand the relationship. The miracle does not dispel their “blindness.”⁵ The hidden message is not to fear not understanding.

Psalm 146:6c (misrepresented as Psalm 146:7 in the Lectionary sloppy scholarship) comes after the storm is over and Israel is back in the Holy Land, to sing, “the God of Jacob keeps faith forever.” While Israel is still insecure, Psalm 146 urges the community to keep faith in the LORD. In contrast to Isaiah, Psalm 146 uses the present tense. Psalm 146 recognizes respect for legitimate law, realizing that such respect harbored Israel through difficult past storms. Getting past the storm gives reason not to fear. Today, modern Israel is in a storm similar to those gone by.

Power gone awry is always a source of trouble. James organizing the assembly without regard to human persons, helps keep power lined up with loving God. Certain persons, however, do merit regard. The Fourth Commandment insists that the Faithful honor their parents. Such honor is not that to which James objects. That notwithstanding, the greatest reason people have to fear is from those close to them. James counsels the Faithful not to fear even those close for their worldly power. Fear of the LORD is the only counsel James offers. The hymn “Be not afraid,” sums up everything in these readings.

For more on sources see the Appendix file. Personal Notes are on the web site at www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, review of Luke Leuk Cheung, The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of the Epistle of James in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 642.

⁵ Mary Ann Beavis, “The Trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65): Reader Response and Greco-Roman Readers,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 4 (October 1987) 591.