

Feast of Saint Mark “Discipleship and Faith”  
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It seems too early in the Easter Season to be talking about the Ascension of the Lord. The Ascension of the Lord happened forty days after the resurrection, right? Easter was only a couple weeks ago, what gives? Well, in fairness to Mark, the ascension of Jesus happened on Easter day in that Gospel. However, it is interesting to point out that Mark’s account here of the ascension and commissioning of the Apostles seems to have been added on later because you cannot find this piece in the oldest copies we have. This of course doesn’t mean this later ending isn’t inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is, but it is good when reading it to bear in mind that the original Gospel of Mark ends with the women fleeing the tomb in fear after seeing a young man in a white robe next to the empty tomb announcing the resurrection. Recognizing this passage as added on later allows us to view this as more of a later reflection of Mark’s community surrounding Christ’s commissioning of the Apostles.

That disciples will go forth and baptize, cast out demons, speak new languages, heal people by the laying on of hands, all of that makes sense. The part about picking up snakes and drinking deadly substances seems really weird. Why is this included? It is included because this community probably saw these kind of things happen with their own eyes. The part about the snakes could be in reference to St. Paul who got bit by a viper in the Acts of the Apostles while gathering firewood and was miraculously unharmed by it. It could also simply be metaphorical of the courage disciples demonstrated in handling dangerous situations. Meanwhile, the drinking deadly things piece could be a reflection on the culinary dangers of proclaiming the Gospel to new cultures. You see, the earliest Christians were Jewish Christians. They are being called to make friends in different cultures. This required them to eat and drink all kinds of things that would have been forbidden in their diet (thus considered deadly). Who knows?

However, I think the best approach to this passage is to not get too caught up with the specific language but rather focus on the gist of it which is this: being a disciple of Jesus is not for wimps. It requires the courage to step out of our comfort zone and travel to strange new lands, engaging with radically different cultures. It requires a willingness to learn new skillsets, like languages, so to more effective as a preacher. It even requires eating and drinking new foods that are suspicious but nevertheless must be consumed with a smile (As a side note, I have been in that situation once or twice in my priesthood...a story for another day). Bottom line, evangelization takes the kind of faith that no matter what danger is placed in our hands, we simply need to trust God’s plan come what may.

The one line I think even the best of disciples can struggle with at times is that part in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done”. What we usually mean by that is, “Thy will be done God so long as it is the same thing as my will.” However, this is not what Jesus meant by this when he taught us that prayer. Discipleship of Jesus means we need to conform our will to God’s will even in times of danger.

In some respects, we can think of the days that we are living in can be seen as perhaps a bit dangerous in some respect. As we navigate these times as disciples, I think Gospel readings like we have today challenge us to consider, when we pray to God “Thy will be done”...do we mean it?