

main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – one

Jesus and the voice from heaven – Mk 1.9-11

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

This first **encounter in Mark's Gospel** is unlike most of the others. In most of the encounters in this series we watch Jesus meeting other people. This time Jesus is directly addressed from heaven by God. This dramatic intervention by God is where Mark's story of Jesus begins. It is probably this encounter that enables all the others to take place at all.

STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
 - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
 - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
 - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 1.9-11**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 1.9-11** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mk 1.9-11** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mk 1.9-11** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

Mark 1.9-11 is one of those stories that is present in similar forms in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel as well as in Mark, so if you use a remembering and re-telling approach you are going to have to decide how closely you all want to keep to Mark's particular telling.

3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group then considers the question:

- "What is this story about?"

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of all the ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

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6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared). This particular encounter probably needs us to start by standing at a different corner of the triangle from where we'll usually begin:

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?**
 - *teasing this out ... What ideas, hopes and experience do we think Jesus may have brought to this baptismal moment? What did Jesus receive from God? What did this encounter do to/for Jesus?*

Trying to look at the story from God's perspective, consider:

- **Why send this message to Jesus from heaven NOW?**
 - *teasing this out ... What is Jesus doing that makes this the right time for God to speak and act? What might God be expecting of Jesus now?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching the encounter?**
 - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help with living now can your group find from what you have watched?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

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8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG (optional)

GOD STANDING BY OUR SIDE based on Mark 1.9-11

tune: How great Thou art... Rejoice and Sing no.117

1. John challenged all to face their sin and failure,
to own their faults; seek rescue in God's name -
but Jesus came, and chose to stand beside us;
to be baptised, though free of taint or blame.
Then God's delight burst thro' the heav'ns above,
the Spirit's pow'r, poured out that hour;
for Jesus showed the essence of God's love -
He lived and died - God by our side!
2. When we're alone, engulfed by countless troubles
and all our hopes by fear and stress outweighed;
still Jesus comes and quietly stands beside us;
to hear and help, tho' we're the ones who strayed.
Then God's delight bursts thro' the heav'ns above,
the Spirit's pow'r, pours out that hour;
still Jesus shows the essence of God's love -
He lived and died - God by our side!
3. When time's complete, prevarication over,
and all are judged before our Maker's throne,
Christ will be there, our advocate beside us,
claim for us life, by offering up his own -
then God's delight will burst the heav'ns above,
the Spirit's pow'r, will fill that hour;
for all will know the essence of God's love -
Christ lived and died - God by our side!

John M. Campbell

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others. Between them, these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of Mark's Gospel story.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'** programme on the Vision4Life website:*

www.vision4life.org.uk

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part one – learning from Mark's big story

Our story is the very first appearance of Jesus in a story in Mark's Gospel. But we can still learn things from the stories placed before and after it and the way it works in the big story:

The bit before our bit (Mk 1.4-8)

- **Helps to set the scene for our story** – it surrounds John and Jesus with a crowd drawn from "the whole of the Judean countryside and Judea" – that makes **our** story a big crowd scene too. Jesus is joining 'everyone' by joining John.
- **Tells of John's prophecy** – this prophecy about the coming one speaks of both water baptism and baptism with the Holy Spirit. How does that relate to **our** story?

The bit after our bit (Mk 1.12-15)

- **Tells of what happened immediately afterwards** – The Spirit (a key player in our story) drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (or tested) for forty days by Satan. This is forty whole days of testing, not just the final duel with tricky questions that we know from Matthew and Luke's Gospels. What does that do to **our** story?
- **Tells of what happened after John's arrest** – Jesus begins a public ministry proclaiming God's Good News about the closeness of God's Rule (Kingdom) and the need to prepare by repenting. How does this reflect back on **our** story?

Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

There are 3 crucial points in Mark where someone declares Jesus to be 'God's son':

- **Our story** tells of a voice from heaven saying 'You are my son, the beloved' at the moment of Jesus' baptism, which seems to mark the very start of his public ministry
- **Mk 9. 7** tells of a voice from a cloud on a mountain saying 'This is my son, the beloved, listen to him', just after Jesus first told how he must suffer & die, then rise.
- **Mk 15.39** tells of a Roman Centurion, a Gentile, at the foot of the cross saying of the now dead Jesus 'This man was God's son!' – only now, in this moment of utter degradation, do we hear this way of seeing Jesus as a confession on human lips.

Can we make anything of that?

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EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Ideas and information that might help us understand our story...

The Wilderness – is not only a desert area, but the sort of place that is out beyond the established control of any city or village – to go and minister there is to withdraw from the whole human social system; to attract *'the whole of Judea'* to join you there is hugely significant and deeply subversive (authorities don't like 'their' people moving out to somewhere beyond their control). Equally, to linger alone in the wilderness is both dangerous and challenging, inviting an extreme test of who you are - physically, personally and spiritually.

Social status and holy status – in ancient societies honour and shame – that is your **family's** honour and shame – were very, very important. Your own social status was directly related to your father's social status, provided you did not dishonour your family. Issues of social status and religious status are going to be very important both in Mark's big story and in a high proportion of the individual stories. Here, at the start of Mark's Gospel, we see this issue of status playing out in religious terms. We know nothing at this stage of the 'regular' family or status of either John the Baptist or Jesus. Our only clues are religious ones...

- **John the Baptist** has acquired significant religious or 'holy man' status through the crowds his challenging message and unconventional life style have attracted. Yet he makes an elaborate play of his own unworthiness in comparison to the one who is coming – *'I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals'*
- **Jesus**, when we first meet him, is equally devoid of status signals or family story – our only clue is John's deference. But then we have this amazing post-baptismal intervention with the claim (that possibly only Jesus hears, at this point) that God recognises Jesus as his much-loved son – will he live up to this high, holy status?

How do social and religious status work in our world today? Similarities? Differences?

Now, see if the information about Jesus' world helps us understand our Gospel story...