

Mark: The movie (Mark 10:32-45)

by [Stacey E. Simpson](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

If Mark's gospel were a movie, this scene would make the perfect trailer. Without entirely giving away the ending, it summarizes all the major themes of Mark's Gospel. In a nutshell, it offers everything that is quintessential Mark: the journey toward the cross, suffering and death, wrongheaded disciples, the reversal of power and Jesus's reflection upon the meaning of his mission. But I'm not sure there would be much of an audience for this movie after the preview; we can be as thick as the disciples when we fail to grasp how difficult and demanding the gospel can be.

The lectionary does preachers a disservice by cutting out verses 32-34: they are essential to the pericope. The scene opens with a solitary figure striking out across the horizon. The camera pans out and we see followers emerge from the dunes. Oddly, we see surprise and fear on their faces. This is the journey toward the cross, only nobody but Jesus seems able to grasp that fact yet. This journey, in Mark's Gospel, is the way of discipleship, and the first scene conveys that—striking out ahead, disciples following behind without fully knowing how or why they are following.

He stops. He motions the twelve aside and explains one last time: "See, we are going to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." Five chapters later, it will all come to pass. This man is a truth teller. He tells the truth about suffering and death, and he tells the truth about resurrection.

For now, the focus is on suffering and death. Mark's Gospel is an extended passion narrative. His point is that we worship a *crucified* Christ. In Jesus's stark prediction, we see a man come to terms with his fate. He is the only one who accepts the inevitability of his destiny. In Mark's day, many objected to the notion of a vulnerable Christ; not much has changed since then. Who wants vulnerability, suffering and death when the economy is good and crime is down and the world has so much to offer? But for Mark, the guts of the gospel is this: we follow a suffering

Christ, a crucified criminal.

Even the disciples couldn't tolerate the nasty predictions that Jesus had a habit of making. When Jesus predicts his own death for the third time, James and John step forward, asking him to do what *they* wish. Who do they think he is—a genie? They ignore Jesus's prediction, and focus instead on their own desires for greatness. This is more remarkable in view of how adamant Jesus had been. He has twice said, "The first shall be last." He has already redirected the disciples concerning their desire for greatness, telling them that to save their lives they must lose them. He has told them they must become like children in order to enter the kingdom. And he has emphasized his own suffering and death three times. Yet the disciples still don't get it.

Jesus has already pointed out what is wrong with the disciples' perspective—they have set their minds on things human rather than divine (Mark 8:33). Jesus has tried to teach the divine perspective—the first shall be last and the last first, whoever wants to be great must become like a servant, God is the author of possibilities, and we must become like children. Here he sums it up again: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Jesus reorders power structures among those who wish to follow him. He has been preaching and teaching and living this all along. Had James and John understood, they would never have asked to be at his right and left hand, places that would ultimately be taken by criminals on either side of Jesus's cross.

The scene closes with Jesus announcing his mission. In all of Mark's Gospel, this is the only time Jesus says a word about his purpose: "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The entire Gospel centers on this revelation. Here, discipleship and Christology come together. We who would follow will find our purpose and the power to live in Jesus teaching: Whoever wants to be first must become the slave of all, and we'll have the power to do it because of the One who did it first for us.

The preview comes to an end. For this Sunday, it is all we have, the gospel in miniature. But it is enough to give us a glimpse into the world—a world where a throne will be exchanged for a cross, a crown will be traded for thorns, and criminals will take the place requested by ambitious disciples. More often than not, we too are

blind to the gruesome reality of what it means to follow Jesus. But the One who healed the blind bids us press on.