



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

READING ST MARK

The readings we hear each Sunday in church follow a three year cycle. In 2017/18 the gospel readings are mainly from St Mark.

What is a gospel?

Mark is generally reckoned to have been the first of the gospel writers. Much of his work was then copied by Matthew and Luke (something we do not approve of today, but perfectly acceptable in their time). We do not know if anyone else had written a gospel before Mark – others survive besides the four in the New Testament, but none date back so early nor, it has to be said, are they equal to the four in quality. So it is worth asking what sort of book the gospels are.

The word 'gospel' was not originally applied to the book. 'Gospel' comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'good news', which is a straight translation of the New Testament Greek 'euangelion'. In the Roman Empire 'euangelion', good news, was applied very often to a message being circulated about a military victory or the accession of a new emperor. It was a message, not a book. Paul uses the word in that way in his letters, and Jesus is quoted as using it as well. Mark begins his book: 'The beginning of the euangelion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. He meant the 'good news' of Jesus, but the word later became the title for the book, and then of all four gospels. (The other three in fact barely use the word at all, and none in their opening sentences.)

The four gospels can be compared to ancient biographies, in which the greatness of the subject is portrayed both through the person's actions and teaching. There is often much about the subject's death and how they approached it. Mark followed these conventions, but unlike Matthew and Luke he does not do the usual thing and give an account of Jesus' birth and childhood. He is not a slave to the mere conventions of biography. From the modern point of view all the gospels are lacking in what we would expect from a biography. There are almost no personal details of Jesus: what he looked like, his personal character or family background. Apart from the last few days of his life the accounts seem to have no time frame. Did his ministry last weeks, months or years? We are not told, really because the writers

were not interested in that side of things. What they wanted to get across was the importance of Jesus in what he taught and did, in his death and resurrection.

Who was Mark?

The author's name is not found in the book – it was added later as a title. Mark was a common name anyway. The writer is traditionally identified with John Mark who appears in the Acts of the Apostles as an associate of Paul. Others put him close to Peter, and he has even been identified as the son of the owner of the upper room where Jesus held the Last Supper. But there is no evidence in the gospel that he knew Jesus personally or any of the apostles. Nor is he familiar with Palestine or Jewish customs. He is very unsympathetic to Jewish observance of the Law. In all likelihood he was writing in the Western Roman Empire, perhaps in Rome, in the 60s or 70s AD.

One of the things clear from the gospel was that Mark was writing up stories that had circulated for years in conversation. If you read the gospel (it only takes an hour or so – try it!) you will find it is made up of a series of anecdotes that have little or no relation to one another. They are like beads on a string. And each story is polished, as it were, by frequent use. But Mark was no mere collector or copier of well-worn tales. He could put his own ideas into the narrative. We might imagine that, as the stories about Jesus were told and re-told, it became the custom for each storyteller to give their own emphasis in the way they told the story. That is certainly what Mark does. Each gospel writer does the same. We are given four portraits of Jesus by four artists, each wanting to say something about what Jesus meant for them.



Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan.

What is special about Mark's gospel?

Older studies used to portray Mark's gospel as the simplest of the four, but nowadays he is seen as one of the most creative and original. Mark does not give any account of Jesus' birth or childhood. Perhaps he did not know the stories we have in Matthew and Luke; perhaps they did not serve the purpose of his story. For

Mark begins with Jesus bursting in out of nowhere. John the Baptist is preaching the coming of the Messiah, God's saviour for Israel, and Jesus then appears and is baptised. The reader is let in on the heavenly voice which tells him he is God's Son, but other people have to find out the hard way.

Throughout the gospel the disciples whom he calls are the slowest to realise

who Jesus is and what that means. Even though they are called to follow him they are hopeless! But the reader is left asking, am I any better? Do I recognise him? Do I follow him?

The 'kingdom of God' is important in the gospel – God's reign on earth finally conquering over evil. It is what Jesus preaches, and what he ushers in by his miracles. Each healing is an advance of the kingdom. But it does not come fully yet. Jesus' suffering and death seem to show its defeat, until the resurrection. (The story of Jesus' last week – the great 'show-down' - takes up a third of the whole book!) Only at the end time will the kingdom come with power for all to see (chapter 13). Until then Jesus' followers are called to follow faithfully in the way of the Kingdom.

What does Mark tell us about Jesus?



Anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

The Jesus of Mark's gospel appears like a bolt out the blue and storms through the gospel. The narrative is littered with the word 'immediately' as if he is rushing round like a whirlwind. He is angry and impatient (for example 3.1-5), certainly not meek and mild! While there is a lot of teaching – the parable of the sower (4.1-20), the right use of the sabbath (2.23-28), marriage, children and money (chapter 10) – much more of the gospel is about Jesus' power as a healer and wonder worker. The devils he casts out recognise him (1.24) – not that the disciples seem to notice! – and his power over storm and sea leaves them wondering who he is (4.35-41). Others reject him outright: his own village turns against him (6.1-6). Strangers who see his miracles ask him to go away (5.17). The religious authorities gang up against him (3.6). Eventually the crowd in Jerusalem will buy for his blood (15.11-15). But those he helps believe in him and follow him – the demoniac (5.18), blind Bartimaeus (10.52), the woman at Bethany (14.3-9). The question, 'Who is Jesus?' reaches its answer in fine irony on Good Friday. In the trial the high priest and Pilate both ask, are you the King of the Jews, and he says he is. And the centurion at the crucifixion is the one who responds with: 'Truly this man was God's son'. Even God seems to have abandoned Jesus. His last words on the cross are the harrowing, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'



He rebuked the winds and said to the sea: Quiet! Be Still!

Mark and the disciples

Meanwhile the disciples had fled. Peter denied he even knew Jesus (14.66-72). The women watch the crucifixion from a safe distance (15.40). The story of the disciples is one of failure – of nerve and of understanding. Even Peter who rightly confesses Jesus to be the Messiah immediately fails to understand what that means (8.27-33). There is a totally comic scene in which Jesus and the disciples are stuck on a boat without enough food (8.14-21). They are grumbling away, and Jesus retorts, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ... Do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect? ... Do you not yet understand?’ You half expect Jesus simply to give up on them, get out of the boat and walk away! But he doesn’t.

Mark is at his most daring when he tells the story of the first Easter morning. The other gospel writers describe how the women who come to the tomb hear that Jesus has been raised, and they run off to tell the other disciples. Modern scholars believe that is the basic story. But Mark tells it differently: the women fled and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Even in the face of the most amazing good news the disciples fail.

How does Mark’s gospel end?



The women ‘said nothing to anyone for they were afraid’ (16.8). That is how Mark’s gospel ends – at least as we have it. No one had yet even seen the risen Jesus though his resurrection had been announced, and earlier in the gospel he had said he would go before them to Galilee. It is clearly

incomplete, and later writers added various endings to round it off. Two versions are frequently printed in modern Bibles (the longer version only in the King James Bible). Modern scholars are divided as to whether the original ending was lost or whether Mark finished like that on purpose. Was he saying to the reader: ‘Right, you have seen what sort of person Jesus was. You have seen how he made a difference and brought in God’s kingdom by healing people and casting out evil. You have seen the power of God in weakness and even in death. You have laughed at the stupidity and cowardice of the first disciples. So how do you complete the story?’