

How to Read Mark's Gospel

This article is based on a talk given to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle on St. Mark's Day, 25th April 2010.

Each year on April 25th, the Church celebrates the feast of St Mark. Who is this Mark? He is usually identified with a young man we meet in the Acts of the Apostles. This Mark was a member of the first Christian community in Jerusalem whose mother offered refuge to Peter when he escaped from Herod's prison (Acts 12:12). We also know of a Mark who was a companion of Paul and Barnabas on their missionary travels (Acts 13:5), but who at a certain point left them, causing Paul to refuse to invite him to join him on a later journey (Acts 13:13; 15:38). But there may well have been a reconciliation since the name of Mark is mentioned in some Pauline letters (Colossians 4:10 and Philemon v. 24). There is also a Mark mentioned as 'my son, Mark' in the conclusion of the First Letter of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). But we must be aware that Mark was a very common name in those days, and we have no guarantee that these several references to 'Mark' refer to the same person and that this Mark was the one who wrote the gospel we know as the 'Gospel according to Mark'.

The real reason why the Church selects a special day in honour of Mark is to show her profound appreciation of the gospel that bears his name. But just as the missionary achievement of Mark in the Acts of the Apostles is overshadowed by those of Paul and Barnabas, so too his gospel has lived in the shade of three gospels of greater length and popularity which we know as Matthew, Luke and John. It is true that the current Lectionary of the Catholic Church for the Sunday Eucharist since 1969 uses Mark as the most common Sunday gospel in its Year B of the cycle; yet for various reasons this gospel receives less exposure than do Matthew in Year A and Luke in Year C.

Despite the greater use of the other gospels in the Church, Mark's gospel is a treasure to be discovered and deserves its day of celebration in the Church's calendar. Like many buried treasures, Mark's gospel has to be dug up layer by layer. One way of approaching this work of excavation is to move step by step by asking four probing questions in four continuous readings of the gospel.

- The first question concerns the story that this gospel tells.
- The second is to examine the portrait of Jesus that it presents.
- The third is to follow the career of those characters that after Jesus are considered the most important, namely the disciples of Jesus.
- The fourth and final question follows logically after the first three, asking which figures in this gospel story does the author want its readers and hearers to take as models and exemplars in their own life of discipleship, those whom we may call the 'little people' of Mark.

The Story of Mark

The first challenge is to grasp Mark's story. It is a good exercise for the reader to try to make a two or three page summary of this. Such a summary would surely note the beginning and end of the gospel. For example, the first verse of Mark gives us a title for the whole work and a title for Jesus, its major character. The work is a 'gospel', an *euaggelion*, a good news which echoes the joyful proclamation made centuries before by the prophet Isaiah who pronounced how beautiful were the feet of those who brought good news of peace and salvation (Isaiah 52:7). It is a gospel about Jesus, the major character whom he calls the Christ and Son of God. The reader already knows what Peter confesses half way through the story, 'You are the Christ' (Mark 8:29), and what the centurion would proclaim once Jesus had died, 'Truly this man was God's Son' (Mark 15:39). Yet paradoxically, the gospel ends with flight and fear, with terror and amazement (Mark 16:8). It is with this verse that most experts on this gospel find the conclusion of the story rather than with Mark 16:20 which was added later.

There are several ways of dividing Mark's work. What follows is one that has been found useful. Unlike a modern author, Mark does not offer a foreword or a preface, but he does provide a prologue which gives the reader information helpful for understanding the story he is about to tell. This 'prologue' of Mark presents to his readers quotes from the Old Testament, the proclamation of John the Baptist about the 'stronger one' who was to come, the coming of Jesus to the Jordan river to be baptised and his subsequent testing by Satan in the desert (Mark 1:2-13). None of this privileged information, shared with Mark's readers, was available to the characters in the account of Jesus which follows.

The gospel narrative can be divided into three major blocks or 'acts'. In the first 'act', we learn about the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee which concludes with the question of Jesus to bewildered disciples in the boat, 'Do you not yet understand?' (1:14-8:21). The second act consists of the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Peter confesses Jesus as 'the Christ', but when Jesus warns his disciples three times about his coming

suffering, death and resurrection and its relevance for their own lives, they misunderstand and resist his message. The block ends with the story of Bartimaeus who, unlike the disciples, recognises his blindness and is able to follow Jesus 'on the way' (8:22-10:52). The third act is set in Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city, engages in controversies in the Temple with the authorities who plot to arrest and kill him, speaks his final words to his disciples and shares a final meal with them, is arrested and executed through crucifixion. He is buried but when women visit his tomb, they are told that he was not there but was risen (11:1-16:8). The final verses of Mark follow as a sort of epilogue, providing a summary of various appearances which are related in other gospels; they are written in a different style from the rest of the Gospel, and are commonly considered as added by a different writer (16:9-20).

The Jesus of Mark

Having grasped the overall outline of the story, it is now time to read through it again, this time concentrating on how Mark portrays Jesus who is its major character. There is something of a tension here, because along with Peter, the reader has to accept this Jesus as The Christ (8:29) and, with the centurion on Calvary, as The Son of God (15:39). He is presented as one who teaches with authority (1:22,27) and has power over nature, demons, disease and death (4:35-5:43). He even does what God does in forgiving sins (2:50), calming storms (4:39), walking on water (6:48), and appearing in glory on the mountain of Transfiguration (9:2).

Yet at the same time, Jesus is human, even weak, who gets angry (3:5), shows ignorance (5:30), and is 'without honour in his own country' (6:4). As Son of Man, 'he must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again' (8:31). This is sometimes called the 'second story' of Jesus in Mark. Having struggled to accept Jesus as the 'stronger one' as the first stage of proper understanding, the hearer of this gospel must recognise him as the one who has to die in shame upon a cross. And this communicates a message for the Christian life of the reader who is one who wants to follow this Jesus.

A third element essential to Mark's portrayal of Jesus is the assurance of Jesus that he would return 'in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (8:38). Not only would Peter and his disciples see him in Galilee after he has been raised from the dead (16:7), but they were to keep awake and be ready for the day of the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory (13:26,37). He warned those who condemned him that they would see 'the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Father, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (8:62).

The Disciples of Jesus

If in our second reading of Mark, we concentrated on the figure of Jesus, in a third reading we are to concentrate on the role of those called disciples. Jesus is never alone in this gospel; he is always accompanied by disciples who were appointed, 'to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and to cast out demons' (3:14-15). Jesus told them that it was to them that the mystery of the kingdom of God was being given (4:11). Sometimes they are examples to the reader, as in their ready response to the call of Jesus by the lakeside (1:16-20) and in their going off on mission on his behalf (6:12-13). On their return, they gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught (6:30). They continued to follow him even when they were amazed and afraid (10:32). They readily obeyed his instructions to prepare the Passover meal (14:16).

Yet their behaviour at other times reveals cause for disappointment and alarm. Three times they failed when in a boat with Jesus; they panicked during the storm (4:38), and again when he came to them walking on the water (6:50) and yet again when they failed to grasp his warning about the leaven of the Pharisees (8:21). On the road to Jerusalem, they three times refused to heed his warning about his coming suffering (8:32; 9:34; 10:37). In Jerusalem, when agitated and distressed in Gethsemane he appealed to them to keep awake, they fell asleep (14:37) and when the mob that came to arrest him, seized him, they all ran away (14:50). Peter, the first name in the list of the Twelve (3:16), denied three times that he ever knew Jesus (14:68, 70, 71). There is no mention of the disciples in the account of the death of Jesus, and whereas the disciples of John the Baptist had been at hand to bury John after his being put to death by Herod (6:29), the disciples of Jesus played no part in his burial.

Yet if we feel ourselves justified in condemning these disciples for apostasy and infidelity in their following of Jesus, we are brought up short when we read the message of the young man speaking to the women at the empty tomb, 'Go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee' (16:7). If we condemn them, Jesus did not.

The Little People in Mark

If then those whom we may call the 'official disciples' of Jesus in Mark's story prove ambiguous and unreliable role models for imitation, we need to read through this gospel a fourth time, concentrating on those characters who come on to the gospel stage but once, and who on each occasion do or say something that can be admired and imitated by the reader. To each of them we may apply words that Jesus spoke about the woman of

Bethany who anointed his feet, 'Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (14:9).

This unnamed woman is just one of many such 'little people' in this gospel. We may recall the request of the Gerasene demoniac 'to be with Jesus' (5:18), an echo of Jesus' invitation to the Twelve (3:14), the confession of the woman with the haemorrhage who by telling Jesus 'the whole truth', was freed from her fear and trembling (5:33), and Jesus' words to Jairus before he raised his daughter, 'Do not fear, only believe' (5:36). After reading the deaf resistance of the disciples to the message of the cross on their way to Jerusalem (8:32; 9:34; 10:37), it is a relief for us to admire the three-fold prayer for sight of Bartimaeus who eagerly followed Jesus on the way (10:51). Jesus had warned that those who wanted to be his followers must take up the cross; Simon of Cyrene did this literally on Jesus' road to Calvary (15:21). Also on Calvary were the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee; these, unlike the invisible disciples, watched the cross from afar (15:40-41), and they became the first to hear the news of the resurrection when they came to the tomb (16:6).

We can add others to this list of 'little people', a list in fact of equal length to the 'official list' of the Twelve in which Mark gives the names of Peter and his companions (3:16-19). So we remember the lively and courageous faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:28) and the astonishing prayer of the father of the epileptic boy who prayed, 'I believe, help my unbelief' (9:24). We appreciate the contribution of the scribe whom Jesus encountered in the Temple and whom he declared to be 'not far from the kingdom of God'. He had asked Jesus about the greatest commandment and added his own comment to the words of Jesus which echoed the prophet Hosea (12:44). Soon after, we read of the widow in the temple whose trust in God allowed her to put both her coins in the collection box (12:44). We meet two more of these 'little people' after the death of Jesus in the persons of the pagan centurion who had supervised the execution and the respected member of the council that had condemned Jesus.

The one confessed Jesus as 'The Son of God' (15:39) and the second took courage to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus and buried him (15:43-46). We have listed twelve such characters. You might like to add more as a result of this fourth reading of the text.

Mark the Pastor

Just as there is uncertainty about the precise identity of Mark, whether he was in fact the person whom Peter in his letter referred to as his 'son', whether he was the John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their missionary travels, there is also uncertainty about the purpose and circumstances of this gospel. But it may well have had its origin in Rome in the time of Nero in his later years (AD 68). We know from the Roman historian Tacitus that the Christians there were under grave threat from the Roman authorities who were blaming them for a great fire that had recently devastated the city. Many, unjustly accused, paid with their lives. Others denied that they were Christians and apostasised. It was dangerous to be a Christian in those days. Mark was writing for such people. The Jesus whom they professed to follow was one who had willingly walked to Jerusalem, the city of his enemies where he knew he faced death. His disciples had struggled in many ways unsuccessfully to remain faithful to their calling but Jesus, despite their failings, summoned them to meet him again in Galilee. Thanks to Mark, memories and traditions were repeated of 'little people' who had said or done something that in turn instructed and encouraged the 'little people' of that small group of Christians in Rome. What Mark wrote has a call on our attention today. As we read it or listen to it, we can join ourselves in spirit and imagination with that group of poor Christians in Rome centuries ago. We know that like the seed in Jesus' parable that was sown in good soil, it can produce a hundred fold (4:20). As the shortest of the gospels, it might seem as insignificant as the mustard seed described in another parable of Jesus, but it can become a great tree in whose branches we can all find shelter (4:32). We celebrate it every year on April 25th.

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