

Taking a closer look at  
St Mark's Gospel

Advent. 2020



Booklet 1



## Welcome

### A short course on Mark's Gospel for the Tring Team Parish

This short advent course is designed to help us understand some of why Mark tells the story the way he does. In most mainstream churches this coming year we will get to read most of Mark's Gospel in our Sunday services (alongside John's Gospel). This course will look at the first half of the Gospel with three topics: 1. What is a Gospel; 2. Mark's portrayal of Discipleship; 3. The Messianic Secret. It doesn't have to be used in Advent. In Lent there will be a follow up looking at the second half of the Gospel.



### Opening conversations? *(Maybe think about these before you meet)*

1. What do you already know about Mark's Gospel?
2. How does Mark start his story of Jesus

#### **Tradition has it that Mark records what he received from Peter**

In around 140AD Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis quoted an unknown elder [Presbyter] and from this we get the tradition that Mark who wasn't an apostle bases his account on what Peter told him:

"And the elder used to say this "Mark became Peter's interpreter [hermeneutes] and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed in order, of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statement in them"

The modern consensus is that it is impossible to definitely say that Mark the evangelist is the John Mark of the New Testament. In other words we don't know who Mark is. It remains likely that it was written in Rome sometime between AD65 and AD75.

## Reading and listening to God's Word



**Read Mark 1.13** (from your usual Bible). Pause, allow to seep in. Read it again preferably from a different translation (below is the Message) If any words or verse jumps out at you, share this with the group. Spend some time discussing what God is saying to you today in this passage

The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you; He'll make the road smooth for you. Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

God's Kingdom Is Here

At once, this same Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by Satan. Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him.



## Teaching

### Some introductory thoughts

In early days it used to be thought that Mark abbreviated Matthew's Gospel (eg Augustine writing at beginning of 5th Century) but since mid 19th Century it is fairly universally accepted that Mark is the first of the four Gospels to have been written. Luke and Matthew in particular are heavily dependant on Mark's account for their own stories. They expanded Mark's Gospel. Matthew and Luke both have their own sources as well (and they share another common source) but the bulk of their account comes directly from Mark. Indeed 612 of Mark's 662 verses are found in Matthew's Gospel. He adopts it wholesale.

So Mark gives us the first Gospel.

### What is a Gospel?

We are used to the idea that we have four Gospels. They form the first four books of the New Testament. They tell us about the life of Jesus and the story leads to his resurrection (no need to worry about spoilers here!)

You probably also know that the term Gospel means "good news" and it is translated as such in our Bibles and that the Latin version gives us the word "Evangelist" . We also use the term Gospel to mean truth.

However, when Mark was writing the term Gospel didn't mean a written document.

No other text has arguably made as great a contribution to the history of Christianity and to the development of a Christian literary tradition as has the Gospel of Mark. From a traditio-historical perspective, it represents the earliest connected literary account of the teaching and activity of Jesus as interpreted by a Christian community in the Mediterranean world some 40 or so years after his death.

*W. R. Telford*

## **Gospel in the Roman World**

The word Gospel would refer to the good news which accompanied a (roman) military victory, and the ensuing triumphal procession through the streets of Rome.

## **Gospel in Paul's writing**

Before Mark was writing, Christians were already using the term Gospel. Another word for this early Christian proclamation is Kerygma. Paul's writings quote some of this "gospel" a clear example is 1 Corinthians 15.3-5

*"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. "*

So Paul's "gospel" refers to an oral proclamation (handing on what I received) and the content of the gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Elsewhere Paul goes on to include the hope for his coming (Parousia). What is not included in Paul's gospel is Jesus' life, his actions and his teachings. We can assume that those who heard Paul's gospel (or kerygma or proclamation), shared by all early Christian communities, must have asked questions like who then is this Jesus, what do we know about his life? But, at first, there was an expectation that Jesus would be coming again within their lifetime so these were secondary questions.

## **Gospel as a new literary genre**

Mark is prompted to move to a written proclamation. It appears that he was handed on a extended passion narrative that presumably circulated as an oral tradition in the early church. To this he has added a written account of the teaching, exorcisms and healings of Jesus (Chapters 1 –8). These all inexorably lead to the cross (Chapters 9 –16). Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark apparently

believes Jesus had a normal parentage and birth and makes no attempt to trace back his ancestry. D E Nineham suggests that the series of unconnected stories which Mark knits together are “almost like a series of snapshots placed side by side in a photograph album.”

So a Gospel is neither an historical account or a biography. The first readers (and hearers) would have known that Jesus was raised from the dead - they knew the statements of faith. We don't get to the end of the story and find the big surprise ending. Weiss coined the phrase that Mark “wrote from faith to faith”. The Gospel then helps us understand more about this Jesus. Mark isn't trying to convince us that Jesus was the Messiah, instead he explains why a victorious figure ends his career in disgrace and dies a criminal's death. His answer is Jesus was innocent and God often produces amazing results from odd situations. Mark wants us to understand why Jesus didn't claim the title Messiah himself (more on this next week) and he wants the readers who themselves were persecuted to take comfort .

Above all Mark wants us to ask the fundamental question of Jesus: who do you say that he is? Peter answers this question in the very heart of the Gospel and so must we.



### **Discussion ideas**

**feel free to ask your own questions**

What does the phrase Gospel truth mean to you?

Are the Gospels meant to be history?

What do you make of the phrase “the beginning of the good news....” Is it the beginning of the book or the beginning of something which is still now only being unfolded in your life?

*Space for your notes*

## Taking it out into the world

You may not have time to do this in your groups. Each week there will be a reflection by a “big name” on the text. You could read this at home.

### ‘The beginning of the good news’ (v.1)

Strange though it may seem, Mark feels compelled to tell us in the opening sentence that this is the beginning. Most translations of Mark render his opening words ‘the beginning of the good news ...’. But Mark doesn’t even bother to use the word ‘the’; he starts with ‘beginning ...’. We are, in other words, straight into it. And, of course, if you turn to the end of Mark’s Gospel, you’ll also see that it has no proper ending either – it is all a bit ragged.

An abrupt beginning and an abrupt ending point to several themes that occur throughout Mark’s Gospel. Readers don’t get a gentle introduction to Jesus. The good news is here, now. And it requires your attention, and a response. Here, now. The end is the same. There is no neat finish. You have to write that yourself, with your life as a disciple.

So there is no room for the armchair critic in Mark’s opening remarks. You are not offered an easy introduction to Jesus – his genealogy, for example (see Luke and Matthew) – but are invited straight away to deal with the challenging presence of John the Baptist. It is his call to repent, be baptized and follow Jesus that forms the heart of Mark’s Gospel. So, the tone of abruptness in the message of Mark is also his theme. There is no time to cogitate and deliberate. Choose Jesus. Drop everything you are doing, and follow him. Now.

Reflection by Martyn Percy. *Martyn is the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. From 2004 to 2014 he was Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon. This reflection was written in 2011.*

Mark’s Gospel is certainly written with a great pace. I listened to it in the car one day. He is driven into the wilderness, before the A41 we are into his ministry, we have healings and exorcisms and by Phasels Wood the plot to kill him was hatched...



Has your life been on hold during the Covid pandemic? What have you been putting off? Reading Mark’s Gospel what are you called to do NOW? What should the Tring Team Parish do to in response, urgently?



# WORSHIP

*(If being used in Advent)*

O God, make speed to save us.  
**O Lord, make haste to help us.**

Let the words of my mouth and the  
meditation of my heart  
**be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,  
my strength and my redeemer.**

*Psalm 19.14*

Saviour eternal,  
life of the world unfailing,  
light everlasting  
and our true redemption.

Taking our humanity  
in your loving freedom,  
you rescued our lost earth  
and filled the world with joy.

By your first advent justify us,  
by your second, set us free:  
that when the great light dawns  
and you come as judge of all,  
we may be robed in immortality  
and ready, Lord, to follow  
in your footsteps blest, wherever  
they may lead.

*Salus Aeterna*

## **Bible Reading**

*Either a little bit from today's  
session or another reading*

## **Song**

*(which may be sung, listened to, or  
read as a poem)*

**1. Like a candle flame,  
flick'ring small  
in our darkness,  
uncreated light  
shines through infant eyes.**

*God is with us, alleluia,  
come to save us, alleluia,  
alleluia!*

**2. Stars and angels sing,  
yet the earth  
sleeps in shadows;  
can this tiny spark  
set a world on fire?**

**3. Yet his light shall shine  
from our lives,  
spirit blazing,  
as we touch the flame  
or his holy fire.**

## **Intercessions**

### **Collect**

Almighty God,  
as your kingdom dawns,  
turn us from the darkness of sin  
to the light of holiness,  
that we may be ready to meet you  
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

May the Lord make us ready for his  
coming in glory. **Amen.**