

6 February 2021

Reading Mark: An Introduction to the Gospel (Mark 1. 1-11)

© Neil Millar

As Sarah mentioned earlier, we are currently in Year B of the church's three-year liturgical cycle. The year Mark's gospel is given priority in worship and preaching. Through the year Sarah will dive into different passages in detail but before we go too far in that direction, she's asked me to offer an overview of the text as a whole. Tonight, I offer a broad introduction, and next week, I'll say more about its core theme.

Mark is believed to be the oldest of the four gospels (written just before or after the sacking of Jerusalem in 70AD). Mark was a key source for both Matthew and Luke, though, being shorter, has been seen as something of 'a Cinderella among the gospels' (Williams 2014.3). Unlike the others (especially John), Mark received relatively scant attention from the great expositors of the early and mediaeval church, and was less likely to be read in public worship. And yet, for all sorts of readers, this gospel has had a remarkable effect.

The great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann is one who owes his faith to reading Mark. It was 1945 and Moltmann was a POW in Scotland. He and fellow prisoners had just been shown photographs of the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps of Belsen and Buchenwald, and were appalled by the realization that the regime they'd served had perpetrated such atrocity. Moltmann had little Christian background, but an army chaplain gave him a copy of the bible, and he wrote later:

I read Mark's Gospel as a whole and came to the story of the passion; when I heard Jesus' death cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness you are living with now.

As a result, Moltmann writes, 'I summoned up the courage to live again.'

A similar story concerns the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who did so much to open up the Russian Orthodox tradition of prayer to the West. As a sceptical young man Bloom was persuaded to go to a camp for young Russians. On that camp he attended a talk by a celebrated and saintly Orthodox theologian that infuriated him. He went home determined to confirm the emptiness and stupidity of Christianity by reading the gospels for himself. He started with Mark, because it was the shortest, and he wrote:

The feeling I had occurs sometimes when you are walking along in the street, and suddenly you turn around because you feel someone is looking at you. While I was reading, before I reached the beginning of the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a Presence...

I realized immediately: if Christ is standing here alive, that means he is the risen Christ.

There and then, Bloom committed himself to the Christian faith and lived it out in a variety of costly ways for the next seventy years.

So, a gospel not so easily dismissed after all; a text we'll be reading for much of this year.

But what exactly is a 'gospel' and how are we to read this one? The word we translate as 'gospel' – '*euangelion*' – was the word you'd have used in the ancient world to signify an important public declaration, like the birth of a new prince, or the ending of a war, or the arrival of a vaccine for some deadly virus; It was a proclamation of *good* news – glad tidings about a happening that in some way 'transforms the landscape of social life.' '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God*', is how Mark gets underway, and from this opening it's clear that this is a book about something important – a new creation ('*the beginning*'), a new era, a new reign. In other words, it's not just a chronicle about some interesting historical figure, it's news of events that alter the shape of what's possible for the reader and their world.

This gospel contains historical and biographical detail, but it is **not** meant to be read as modern history or biography. Mark's aim is not a blow-by-blow account of Jesus' life or teaching; his main concern is to alert us to (and invite us into) a new possibility for being – to evoke faith and to strengthen it. In that sense, what St John wrote of his gospel holds equally for Mark: *'these are written'* says John *'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name'* (Jn 20.31).

Well, following the example of both Moltmann and Bloom, I took the opportunity recently to read Mark in one sitting. If you can, I encourage you to have a go yourself. It's something we rarely do with scripture but very worthwhile for getting an overall sense of the text. If you do this, you'll notice a few things, I think.

First, you'll realise that nothing very affirming is said about any official group in this gospel – Roman's religious officials, Jews and disciples. In the main, 'the Twelve', for example (the disciples) come across as slow and stumbling in faith. In Matthew and Luke, they are generally portrayed more sympathetically but in Mark they're almost always putting their foot in things and/or reacting badly. On the other hand, an unlikely cast of characters make cameos in this gospel that model aspects of what it means to exercise faith in Jesus – the Syrophoenician woman, Jairus, Joseph of Arimathea, the woman with the haemorrhage, the woman who anoints Jesus, blind Bartimaeus, the Gerasene demoniac and those friends who lower their paralysed mate through the roof, for example. It's as if Mark is saying, 'if you want to know about true discipleship learn from these people; they'll show you how; and (as an implication) if *they* can, as unlikely as that may seem, then so can you'. All the same, I'm always encouraged that Jesus has a place for, and is patient with, those who like the twelve so frequently blunder and bumble along!!

So, what else is striking about Mark's account? Well, we'll see that he is fond of clustering material like parables and miracle stories together. We're not supposed to think that these things all happened or were said on the same occasion or in the same place. Rather they illustrate similar points and build the picture. As part of this Mark

also likes adding stories within stories – like Jesus’ encounter with the haemorrhaging woman on his way to attend to Jairus’ daughter. And, strangely, since this is the shortest gospel, Mark has a habit of peppering his account with vivid descriptive notes, such as the grass being *‘green’*, and the child being *‘little’*, and Jesus being asleep *‘on a cushion in the stern* of the boat’. Mark also often records the words of Jesus in his original tongue, Aramaic – *‘Boangeres’* (3.17); *‘Talitha cum’* (5.17); *‘Corban’* (7.11), *‘Ephaphatha’* (7.34); *eli eli lama sabachthani* (15.34). This likely reflects Peter’s aural memory and the fact that he (Peter) was a key source for Mark.

Mark is also interested in feelings – in the fact that Jesus was *‘moved with pity’* (1.41), and *‘grieved at their hardness of heart’* (3.5); and that people on hearing Jesus or seeing him act were frequently *‘astounded’* and sometimes *‘afraid’*, even *‘terrified.’* On 41 occasions, Mark uses the word *‘immediately’*, and on 25 occasions, the word *‘again’*. The effect of this language is to give the gospel a sense of imminence and urgency. The symbol of Mark’s gospel is traditionally a lion, and maybe this is part of the reason why, this sense of dynamism and forward thrust – it really does roar along, and maybe you even sensed that in today’s reading (Mark 1.1-11). Unlike Matthew or Luke, with their measured opening genealogies and expansive birth narratives, Mark just pounces in. By verse 10, Jesus is baptised, and within three chapters they’re plotting to kill him. Indeed, some have suggested that Mark is little more than an extended passion narrative (more of that next week).

One more thing to note today, and that’s what has sometimes called Mark’s *‘secrecy motif’*. In this gospel, demons frequently recognise Jesus, and when they do, Jesus inevitably commands them to be silent about who he is. Also, when he heals; for example, the leper in chapter 1, he says things like: *‘Take care to say nothing to anyone’* (1.44). And, when Peter finally recognised him as the Messiah at Caesarea-Philippi (8.34), Jesus sternly ordered not to tell anyone. What’s this about? And, how does it square with the notion of *gospel as public proclamation*? Is this one of Mark’s literary devices, or does it accurately highlight the insistence of Jesus himself? Much scholarly ink has been spilt on this question, more than I can cover here.

In the end, I'm persuaded by those who suggest it has something to do with *Jesus'* desire not to be seen or sought simply as a worker of wonders? A position highlighted by Mark in the way he records these stories. In support of this, Rowan Williams points out that, 'Charismatic healers wandered around the ancient Near East in substantial numbers ...and in that sense Jesus was a familiar figure in the Mediterranean scene of his day'. In his attempts to silence talk of his miracles, Jesus seems to have been discouraging people from treating him as just another charismatic healer; challenging them to recognise that he and his mission were about something more profound and self-implicating. Out of compassion, Jesus does heal and help people, plenty of them, but he also seeks connection, a relationship of growing trust and commitment – of belief (faith) *in him*. This is where true healing, real change takes root – in the context of an ongoing, deepening relationship with the Son of God.

This, in turn, is why we'll keep returning to Mark's gospel, that a reconciling relationship with Jesus the Christ may continue to grow and transform our lives, our church, our world. More of that in the months to come.

For now, I'll close with a helpful summary from Rowan Williams' brilliant little introduction to this gospel. No Benedictus sermon would be complete without a liberal sprinkling of Rowan quotes, and this one, as always, is helpful. It's to do with his reflections on context of Mark's original audience. Williams writes:

Commentators on Mark have quite often said that you must imagine the Gospel aimed at a Church that is perhaps a bit too much in love with wonderworking and success, a Church that puts too much store by tangible signs of God's favour and God's assistance; and I think there's a great deal in that. But this has to be filled out further by what some other commentators have suggested – that Mark is writing for a church baffled and fearful because the signs and the miracles aren't coming thick and fast. What is coming thick and fast is persecution and a sense of threat and failure. Mark is writing into the life of communities experiencing fear and disorientation... writing

to reinforce a faith in God who does not step down from heaven to solve problems but who is already in the heart of the world, holding the suffering and the pain in himself and transforming it by the sheer indestructible energy of his mercy.

This is the astonishing news that Mark has to share, which makes it good news indeed – for them and for us!

References

Rowan Williams (2014) *Meeting God in Mark*, SPCK, London.

Bonny Bowman Thurston (2002) *Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.