

Reading Mark

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As you probably know, in Advent we commenced Year B in the church's three-year liturgical cycle. In Year B, the gospel of Mark has priority in our Sunday readings and so before we launch into the detail of specific passages, I thought it might be helpful to offer an overview of the text as a whole.

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 the shortest, 'can seem like something of a Cinderella among the gospels' (Williams 2014.3). It received relatively scant attention from the great expositors of the early church, and the mediaeval church, and was little 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 atrocities. Moltmann had little Christian background, but an army chaplain gave him a copy of the bible. 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, he wrote, 'I summoned up the courage to live again.'

A similar story comes from the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who did so much to open up the Russian Orthodox tradition of prayer. 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. 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; 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 and new – 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 the world.

The gospel contains historical and biographical detail, but it is **not** meant to be read as a 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 strengthen it. In that sense, what St John wrote of his gospel holds equally for the gospel of Mark: *'these are written 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 both Moltmann and Bloom, I took the opportunity this week 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 a text. If you do this, you'll notice a few things, I think.

First, you'll realise that nothing very affirming is said about the disciples (or any official group) in this gospel. In the main, 'the Twelve' 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 Syrophenician 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 if *they* can, as unlikely as that may seem,

then so can you'. At the same time, I'm always encouraged that Jesus has a place for, and is patient with, those who like the disciples who frequently stumble bumble along!!

So, what else is striking about Mark's account? Well, we'll see that Mark is fond of clustering material like the parables and the miracle stories together. We're not supposed to think that these things all happened at the same time or place. Rather they illustrate similar points – build the picture. As part of this Mark also likes adding stories within stories – like Jesus' encounter with the haemorrhaging woman on the 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 his (Peter's) stories were 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 or seeing Jesus so often reacted with astonishment' and 'amazement'. 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 immediacy and urgency. The symbol of Mark's gospel is traditionally a lion, and maybe this is the reason, this sense of dynamism and forward thrust – it roars along, and maybe you even sensed that in today's reading (Mark 1.1-11). Unlike Matthew or Luke, with their measured

genealogies and expansive birth narratives, Mark pounces in. By verse 10, Jesus is baptised, and within three chapters they're plotting to kill him.

One more thing to note today, and that's what's sometimes referred to as the 'secrecy motif'. In Mark's gospel, demons frequently recognise Jesus and, on each occasion, he commands them to be silent about who he is; when he heals the leper, he says '*Take care to say nothing to anyone*' (1.44); and when he finally recognises Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea-Philippi, Peter is sternly ordered not to tell anyone. What's this about; how does it square with the notion of *gospel as public proclamation*? Is it a unique Markan literary device or does it accurately highlight an insistence of Jesus himself? Much scholarly ink has been spilt on this question, more than I can cover here.

In the end, I wonder if it has something to do with Jesus' desire not to be seen or sought simply as a wonder worker? As Rowan Williams has noted, '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, he seems to have been discouraging people from treating him as just another charismatic healer; challenging them to recognise that his mission was about something more profound and self-implicating. Out of his compassion, Jesus does heal and help people, and plenty of them, but he also seeks connection, a relationship of growing trust – belief, faith *in him*. This is where true healing takes place, takes root – in the context of an ongoing, deepening relationship with the Son of God.

It's the reason we'll keep returning to Mark, that this reconciling relationship with Jesus the Christ may continue to grow and transform our lives, our church, and our world. For now, I'll close with a helpful summary

from Rowan Williams' brilliant little introduction to this gospel. 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!

References

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

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