

Our Lent study course will be four sermons on the four gospels and today we begin with St Mark's. There is something which should be said first about all the gospels. They are not biographies or lives of Jesus. Biography is modern literary genre – like the novel. The gospels are not biographies but preaching and teaching material based on incidents in the life of Christ as recalled by eye-witnesses, preserved in oral tradition and finally edited under the names of the four writers Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

I begin with St Mark because it is widely agreed that his gospel was the first to be written. Why do we think this? Because the whole of the gospel of Mark is reproduced in the gospel of Matthew and half of it in Luke. We know only a little about St Mark: that he was a companion of St Paul on one of the missionary journeys, and St Peter's first Epistle tells us that he had Mark with him in Rome shortly before Peter's crucifixion in Nero's persecution in AD 65. St Mark seems to have spent a lot of time with St Peter and, in the very first chapter of his gospel, he records how Jesus healed St Peter's mother-in-law of her fever. In AD 140, Bishop Papias of Hieropolis wrote: *Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that Peter remembered of the things said and done by the Lord.*

Each of the four gospels has its own character and they are all so different: If St Luke's gospel is a love story, St Matthew's an intricate tapestry, St John's a metaphysical poem, then St Mark's is a telegram from the bridge of *The Titanic* one minute after the iceberg struck. That is, it is a gospel of crisis, of desperation with the sense of a spectacular ending.

Mark is something of a wild man and his language is the coarsest Greek in the New Testament. He is impetuous and relentless. His gospel is peppered with the word *euthus* which is translated *straightway* or *immediately*. St Mark's gospel is a picture of restless, busy men, always on the go. His language is often violent as when he reports how Jesus cursed the barren fig tree and threw the money-changers out of the temple. He shows Jesus treating even his family and friends roughly. When the disciples tell him, *behold thy mother and thy brethren seek thee*. He answers, *Who is my mother, or my brethren?* And when Peter will not accept Christ's prophecy that he will go up to Jerusalem and be crucified, Jesus addresses Peter as the devil: *Get thee behind me Satan!* Mark, the wild man, portrays Jesus as a wild man and says *He is beside himself!*

There is no Christmas story in St Mark's gospel. No shepherds. No Kings. No inn. No manger. He begins his gospel with Jesus already a grown man. There are no resurrection stories either. No appearance of Jesus in the upper room, by the sea or on the walk to Emmaus. The last eight verses of the gospel – which do include a resurrection appearance - are a 2nd century addition by an editor who couldn't put up with the starkness and bleakness of St Mark's original ending.

St Mark tells us of the crucifixion. But there are no comforting words from the Cross. In St Mark's gospel Jesus does not say to the thief *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise*. He does not gently give his mother into the care of St John. He does not say, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*. The only words from the mouth of the dying Jesus are words of dereliction: *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And then the scene at the tomb on Easter morning. The women do not see the risen Jesus. The scene is desolate, terrifying, panic-stricken:

And they went out quickly and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed; neither said they anything to any man; for they were afraid.

The theologian Denis Nineham gives us a good insight into the character of Jesus as portrayed by St Mark:

Anyone who reads this gospel straight through will recognise that it is as the Son of God rather than as a teacher or a prophet that St Mark presents Our Lord. Jesus comes before us as the mysterious Son of God – a numinous, rather awful figure whose work is to bring home to his generation the conviction that, by his ministry and his death, he will hasten the coming of the kingdom.

There are only thirty-four verses of parables in St Mark's gospel – mainly the Parable of the Sower. And even this is included only to mock his disciples for their lack of understanding: *Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?*

The relentless *allegro agitato* of St Mark's gospel is a vivid, breathtaking account of conflict: Jesus the exorcist and his conflict with the demons, with sickness, with stupidity, with obduracy, hardness of heart and with the corrupt religious authorities.

In the midst of all this haste and strife, there are some astonishingly personal and evocative touches. I said that St Mark was close to St Peter. Well, in his account of how all the disciples *forsook him and fled*, St Mark includes these mysterious words:

And there followed Jesus a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him. And he left the linen cloth and fled from them, naked.

Why mention such a detail? The intriguing conjecture is that this is St Mark's signature: that *he* was the young man in the linen cloth who fled naked on the night when Jesus was arrested.

Not many parables in this gospel, but plenty of prophecy. Jesus explicitly foretells the fall of Jerusalem – something which came to pass about twenty-seven years after the crucifixion. Looking out over the city, Jesus says:

Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down. When ye shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing where it ought not, then let them that be in Judea flee unto the mountains...

The abomination of desolation was the Roman standard. The Roman legions sacked Jerusalem in AD 70.

Plenty of prophecy. Prophecy in which Jesus out of his mouth reveals exactly who he is:

Again the High Priest asked him and said unto him, 'Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am: and ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven...'

And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then shall he send his angels and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

So in all the restlessness, disjunction and violent movement of St Mark's gospel, who is Jesus meant to be? You know that *gospel* means *good news*. But what is the good news according to St Mark among all this fear and disturbance? The answer is that the good news is so amazing that even the disciples who live close to Jesus every day don't understand it. The good news is so wild, incredible, original and unexpected that they don't get it even when Jesus spells it out to them in words of one syllable:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

You couldn't make it plainer than that, could you? St Mark is telling us that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God prophesied in *the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*:

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid, as it were, our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

For St Mark it is not the teaching of Christ which is at the centre of what he means. It is what he does in his life of absolute conflict. Even more, it is what Christ achieves by his death and demonstrates by his resurrection. I said at the start that the gospels are not biographies or novels. But, on reflection, we see that St Mark's gospel has much in common with the modernist novel – in which the unknown, mysterious and misunderstood stranger, whom no one understands, turns out to be the ambiguous tragic and triumphant hero who brings about deliverance.

