

Mark...The Fundamental Gospel

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The Gospel of Mark is fundamental in the simple sense that, in the view of virtually all students of the book in recent years, it was the first of the four to be written. It is also fundamental in the sense that, if this is true, the other two Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, are, to one degree or another, based upon it: they use it, supplement it, and adapt it.

With that in mind, we need to be clear about what sort of book this is: how can we best describe it, so that we can use it and work with it? The oldest and most obvious answer is: it is a sort of life of Jesus or perhaps memories of Jesus. In other words, it is chiefly a story. But stories are of many different kinds and it is worth trying to be clear what kind of story this is. The likelihood is that it is not a story written simply for the sake of the yarn. Rather, it is a story with a message. You could define it by saying that it is a statement of the Christian faith in the medium of story. In this way, we would contrast it with other early Christian writings which lay out the faith in other ways, mainly more abstract or even theoretical. Paul's letters, for example, or the Letter to the Hebrews are statements of the Christian faith for a variety of purposes, sometimes rather down-to-earth, as in 1 Corinthians, but often more plainly concerned with ideas or ways of putting the faith in arguments, often drawn partly from the inherited Jewish scriptures. This is the case with Hebrews, Romans and much of Galatians, for example. Mark chose to lay out his faith differently: in terms of the story of Jesus. Looking back, we can see that this was a momentous innovation and it has coloured Christian life ever since. Many more Christians have had their faith and their Christian lives formed by the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection than by the thinking of Paul. The story had coloured our imagination and stimulated prayer and practical living.

Nevertheless we should stress that it was not a matter of telling the story chiefly to be exciting or impressive: it was told because of the Christian faith that inspired it. But we are well aware that Christian faith comes in many kinds of package. It can be expressed in a variety of words and from a variety of angles. So the next question is: what is Mark's angle on faith and how does he see it and then write about it? It is of course a question we can ask of any of the evangelists, but the process starts with Mark.

Now, this may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth going into. But it is in fact quite a new perspective on this (and the other) Gospels - about a century old: not much in proportion to the whole of Christian history. Formerly, the Gospels were read as edifying lives of Jesus, feeding our devotion and giving us examples to follow (and sometimes to avoid). That they could tell us how we might believe the faith was not to the fore. And books about them, if they were not chiefly devotional in tone, urging us to imitate Jesus or obey his teaching or be moved by his life and death, would discuss matters of authorship, date and place of writing. We can now see that, not only are these questions really beyond our capacity to answer with certainty, they are not really very important - if our prime task is to 'hear' what Mark meant us to hear. Even if we decide finally that we do not see the faith in the way that he saw it, but with a different emphasis or in a different pattern, at least we should give him a hearing! After all, his act in writing such a book was, as we have said, momentous. It was as original in its way as the writing of the first book of philosophy or engineering.

There is of course a final introductory question: why did he bother to write such a book at all? We cannot be sure, but it may be that by the final years of the first century, many Christians were asking more factual questions about Jesus' life and death and wanted to know 'how it all began'. That would mean going beyond 'ideas' and moving towards narrative - which is in any case much easier for many minds to absorb. It may be more useful too in the instruction of converts and the edification of Christians at their gatherings for worship.

Mark's angle of faith

If we want to identify the way Mark saw Christian faith, we can only set about examining his Gospel itself. But there is one possible point of entry that is worth trying. We believe that Mark wrote about 70AD - there can be no certainty but that is a reasonable guess. Therefore he wrote after the death of Paul the apostle - and more to the point, when Paul's teaching was already known, at least in some Christian circles, and his letters were already known and read. So it is worth seeing whether Mark shows any signs of having been influenced by Paul's work.

It is clear from the career of Paul that, partly as a result of him, Christian thinking already took two different forms or tendencies. One, which we may take to be the older of the two, said that faith in Jesus was built on Jewish faith and was indeed its fulfilment. This meant that becoming a follower of Jesus involved taking on at any rate the greater part of Jewish observance, including practices that were alien to non-Jews (circumcision, detailed dietary and cooking regulations, strict keeping of Sabbath) - not to speak of a Jewish ethos that might have Jesus now in its centre but had a great many aspects that appeared to have little to do with him. The church in Jerusalem, including its leaders, James (Jesus' brother) and Peter, favoured such a position. Paul, by contrast, seeing his calling as making Jesus known to non-Jews and as, in whatever sense, bringing the Jewish-Gentile division to an end, held to the single-minded purity of faith in Jesus as the sufficient clue to God's purpose and to our true relationship with him. Jesus had indeed 'fulfilled' Judaism and that meant that Jews now had no 'privilege' over Gentiles when it came to Jesus' saving work. Does Mark show signs of being affected by this division? If so, on which side does he belong?

Now at first sight, the Gospel has only slight bearing on the matters in dispute: we scarcely see anything of Gentiles and the setting is wholly Palestinian. But closer examination may reveal that this is a helpful way of beginning to pinpoint Mark's way of seeing Jesus and faith centring on him. For example, both Paul and Mark fix our attention overwhelmingly on Jesus' death as the key to his mission from God and to the understanding of his purpose. In Mark, Jesus' whole life points to it and drives rapidly towards it: note the well-known constant use of 'immediately'. The baptism in 1.9-11 foreshadows it, with its naming of Jesus as God's son, which is reproduced at the end in the centurion's confession of faith (15.39); and the temptation (in Mark) looks forward to the 'testing' of Gethsemane. Three times Jesus formally tells us his coming death (8.31; 9.31; 10.32-34), and parables speak of seeds that die in order to flourish (e.g. 4.26-29). Moreover, it is in Mark that we see the following of Jesus described in terms of death (8.34; 10.35-45). This latter passage shies away from a glorious future in store; and the same is true in Mark's brief and shadowy (but actually full of hope) resurrection story in 16.1-8 (the 'longer endings' being the work of second-century scribes who could not quite live with what Mark had left for them). Paul had already shown impatience with Christians who lived on a cloud of euphoria, deceiving themselves about the realities of our experience (1 *Corinthians* 14-15). Like Mark's Jesus (8.38-39), Paul saw both baptism and eucharist in terms of 'sharing in' Christ's death (*Romans* 6.1-11; 1 *Corinthians* 10.16-17; 11.25). These were not immediate 'trips' into a heavenly world where spiritual prowess was a matter of superior enthusiasm, but the necessary means of sharing in Christ, both crucified and risen, with all of us on the same footing.

It is Mark who depicts Jesus taking a view of the Jewish law and its observance which is constantly critical, notably on the issues of Sabbath (2.23-3.6) and dietary laws (7.19); as well as the exalting of the commands to love God and neighbour way above the whole sacrificial apparatus (12.28-34). (A glance at Matthew's parallel passages will show how unhappy he was with this depiction of the Lord's teaching.)

Insistent themes

To be realistic, we should think of Mark's Gospel being read, probably solemnly, to a congregation at a single sitting. There was no such thing as private, silent reading at this time. There are signs that it was written by (and perhaps for) people who had some training (of a kind now confined to some politicians and lawyers) in the formal rules of rhetoric i.e. the art of persuasive speech. These included the use of repetition, to impress particular thoughts and images on the hearer's mind. No wonder then that Mark uses, time and again, the image of bread (or corn): we think of the disciples in the cornfield (2.23-28), the parable of the sower (4.1-20, *itself full of hints taken up elsewhere*), the two great feeding miracles (6.31-44 and 8.1-10), together with the 'one loaf' which the disciples can make no sense of (8.14-21), and the 'moment of truth', at the Last Supper (14.22-25). Jesus' own self-offering is the meaning of the bread -in which we share (again, like Paul in 1 *Corinthians* 10.16-17).

Moreover, Christian life, like that of Jesus, is not a static condition of spiritual elevation: it is a 'way' whose end is Jerusalem and the cross. The word 'way' appears first in 1.2-3 and then constantly, notably at the start and end of the healing of Bartimaeus (10.46-52), who begins off the 'way' and, once sight is given, follows Jesus 'in the way' - with Jerusalem immediately in view. (The connections, plain in Greek, are often obscured in translation.) 'Following' rather than 'learning' is indeed Mark's chief role for the 'disciples' (= pupils) of Jesus.

A puzzle in Mark is the almost poor image of the disciples, culminating in their forsaking him at the arrest. These men are not edifying models. At the same time, those who receive Jesus' healing touch or accept his message and 'see' or 'hear' are, by contrast, models for us to follow: most notably, the woman who anoints Jesus in 14.3-12. Note that her 'successful' anointing transcends the futile attempt of the women followers to anoint Jesus' dead body in 16.1-8. Is this away of making us see the risks as well as the joys of being on Jesus' side? There is no denying that this Gospel has its grimly realistic aspect. This is not a book to take up lightly and preaching from it may give us grief as well as joy. It takes the Spirit's courage.

Evidently, Mark's message was for Christians who could be led to see the crisis to which their faith summoned them. It was a call for alertness and realism and constant readiness for sacrifice (including that of money, 10.23-30). In that sense, this is not a cheerful book: nor is it as 'useful' as that of Matthew or Luke, in that it does not give advice on many issues that we might choose to ask about. No doubt that is part of the reason why the others so soon wrote amended and enlarged versions of Mark. They were rewarded by being a great deal more popular (Matthew above all) down the centuries - until recently, when at last, after century upon century of neglect, the Church has decided to read Mark through on Sundays every third year. Perhaps this is indeed a Gospel for our times.

For more on this topic see Leslie Houlden, *The Strange Story of the Gospels*, SPCK 2002.