

Mark the Evangelist by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th April 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Acts 15:35-41, Mark 13:5-13

Introduction

Have you ever written a book, or even thought about writing one? I'm sure most of us have written essays in the past, even if the last time was when we were at school. My longest piece of writing was a dissertation on the book of Judges, which was about 15,000 words long. In normal sized font and spacing that's about 25 sides of A4. Suppose I gave you this assignment – write a book about 15,000 words long containing the most important information you know for the salvation of the world: what would you write?

Today's sermon is about a man who did just that. His book begins with the words: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". The Gospel of Mark runs to about 25 sides of A4 in Times New Roman point size 12, single spaced. And there is a lot packed in. Starting with quotations from Old Testament prophecy, Mark tells of John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Jesus, then Jesus' own baptism, his temptation and then the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. In a fast-paced narrative, Jesus calls disciples, heals the sick, casts out demons and by the beginning of chapter two has upset Pharisees and scribes, whose opposition to him mounts throughout the remaining

chapters. Jesus manages to fit in some parables and other teaching, and predictions of his death and resurrection, before making a Messianic entry to Jerusalem on a donkey, causing mayhem in the Temple, responding to challenges from the authorities, and finally, after a last supper with his disciples, being arrested, tried, sentenced and executed. The final enigmatic 8 verses in chapter 16 leave the story hanging in the air, as women at Jesus' tomb see an angel, and then run away, too frightened to tell anyone.

But although the pace is fast, Mark's descriptions of Jesus' interactions with particular individuals are full of detail which later gospel writers miss out: the original Aramaic words which Jesus speaks to Jairus's dead daughter¹; the internal feelings of Herod and his wife Herodias about John the Baptist²; the cost of giving bread to 5,000 people³; and the names of the blind beggar in Jericho⁴ and of the sons of Simon of Cyrene⁵. There's an immediacy and realism in Mark's writing which grips the imagination and speaks to our own experiences of life. It's generally believed that Mark was the first of our four gospels to be written, and that Matthew and Luke used it as the basis for their gospels, smoothing out Mark's language and omitting some of his details while adding other events and teachings of Jesus.

¹ Mark 5:41

² Mark 6:14ff

³ Mark 6:37 (John also mentions 200 denarii, but Matthew and Luke do not.)

⁴ Mark 10:46

⁵ Mark 15:21

Who was Mark?

So who was the writer of Mark's gospel?

The early church identified him with John Mark, the younger cousin of Barnabas, whose mother Mary (presumably a wealthy widow) owned a large house in Jerusalem. It seems likely that this house was the setting for the Last Supper, the appearance of the risen Jesus on Easter Sunday and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost. It was certainly one of the meeting places of the Jerusalem church in later years, as it is the place mentioned in Acts chapter 12⁶, where a group are praying for Peter who has been imprisoned.

Like many Jews of the time, Mark has two names: a Jewish name, John (in Hebrew *Yôḥānān*), and a Roman name, Mark, or Marcus (in Greek *Markos*). It seems very likely that he is the young man, probably a teenager, who runs away naked as the soldiers try to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane⁷, as there seems to be no other explanation of why that detail is mentioned in the gospel.⁸

The first time he is mentioned by name is in the Acts of the Apostles, when Barnabas brings him to Antioch in Syria, where he is returning with Saul (who will later be known as Paul) after a mission to Jerusalem.⁹ He accompanies Barnabas and Paul on their first evangelistic journey to

⁶ Acts 12:6-17

⁷ Mark 14:51-52

⁸ Some think that the man carrying the water jar in Mark 14:13 and Luke 22:10 is also John Mark

⁹ Acts 12:25

Cyprus, but when they get to the port of Perga in southern Turkey, John Mark opts out and returns to Jerusalem.¹⁰ Later on, when Paul and Barnabas are about to set out on their second missionary journey, Barnabas wants to take John Mark, but Paul refuses, because Mark had “deserted” them on the first journey, and Paul presumably considers him unreliable, and a liability. Luke records that “the disagreement became so sharp that they parted company”, and Barnabas took Mark back to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him and heads off across Turkey.¹¹

We hear no more of John Mark or Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles, but Paul mentions them much later in letters from prison, probably written from Rome. In his letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, written together, he passes on Mark’s greetings, indicating that Mark is with him.¹² And later, in Paul’s second letter to Timothy (possibly his last letter before being executed), he says “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me in ministry”.¹³ It is clear that Paul and Mark are reconciled, and Paul has recognised Mark’s worth. The person whom Paul earlier considered a liability became an asset.

Mark is also mentioned at the end of the first letter of Peter, where he is described as “my son Mark”¹⁴. This letter also seems to have been written from Rome.

¹⁰ Acts 13:13

¹¹ Acts 15:37-40

¹² Colossians 4:10, Philemon 24

¹³ 2 Timothy 4:11

¹⁴ 1 Peter 5:13

Evidence for authorship of Mark's Gospel

But did this John Mark write the gospel of Mark? To answer this we turn to the later church historian Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, who was writing about 250 years later but quotes verbatim from other much earlier writings which have since been lost. One significant quote is from a writer called Papias, who was a companion of Polycarp, and wrote near the beginning of the second century. This is what Papias says about Mark:

“Mark, who had been Peter’s interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord’s sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, one of Peter’s. Peter used to adapt his teachings to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord’s sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only – to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it.”¹⁵

Eusebius also mentions another tradition that Mark went to Egypt and preached the Gospel in the major city of Alexandria, bringing many to faith in Jesus and starting several churches¹⁶. The Coptic and Orthodox churches in Egypt trace their origin to him. We can’t be sure whether this is true. But one thing we can be sure of: the young man who ran away in the garden, and who dropped out of an exciting but challenging mission to return home, made good

¹⁵ *The History of the Church*, Book 3, chapter 39

¹⁶ *The History of the Church*, Book 2, chapter 16)

and went on to share the good news about Jesus with what is now billions of people throughout the world, by writing it down in a book.

What can we learn from the story of Mark?

From the little information we have about Mark it's difficult to make a reliable assessment of his personality, but I rather suspect that he was not cut out to be a leader. John Mark's father had died and his older cousin Barnabas seems to have taken him under his wing, encouraging him and mentoring him. When Mark left the first missionary journey with Paul, Barnabas didn't give up on him, but wanted to give him a second chance. And through that encouragement and mentoring, Mark was prepared for his later role as an assistant to both Peter and Paul.

I wonder what have been the failures in your life? Was there someone who was a Barnabas to your John Mark? Or have you been the one to encourage and mentor another person? Most of us need some encouragement and mentoring at some point in our lives. I was helped at several difficult moments in my life by people who showed me kindness and gave me encouragement and sometimes practical advice. There is one person in particular without whose help I would not still be here at St Michael's. And had Barnabas not given John Mark a second chance, would we today have the Gospel of Mark to read?

So, thinking about yourself, would you value the opportunity to meet from time to time with a more experienced Christian who can mentor and encourage you? Or could you offer yourself as a mentor or encourager to another

Christian who is perhaps younger in the faith? The Diocese of Oxford has developed a scheme for setting up such relationships of encouragement, with training provided. You can read more about it in the April newsletter. Please get in touch with me if you are interested in taking part.

And there is also an opportunity, through Sandhurst Youth, to be a mentor to a young person in our town. Mike Gower can tell you more, if you're interested.

So let's take a moment to give thanks for those who have encouraged us along the way, and for what we've been able to achieve because of their support. Let's think about who we could encourage, so that they fulfil their potential and can achieve great things. And maybe we could consider letting someone else be our mentor, to enable us to know God better and to serve him more effectively in our lives.

Eusebius on the writer of Mark's gospel:

So brightly shone the light of true religion on the minds of Peter's hearers that, not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine message, they resorted to appeals of every kind to induce Mark (whole gospel we have), as he was a follower of Peter, to leave them in writing a summary of the instruction they had received by word of mouth, nor did they let him go until they had persuaded him, and thus became responsible for the writing of what is known as the Gospel according to Mark. (*The History of the Church*, Bk 2 ch 15)

Eusebius quoting from Papias:

This, too, [John] the presbyter used to say. "Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, one of Peter's. Peter used to adapt his teachings to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only – to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it." (*The History of the Church*, Bk 3, ch 39)

On Mark preaching in Egypt:

Mark is said to have been the first man to set out for Egypt and preach there the gospel which he had himself written down, and the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself. (*The History of the Church*, Bk 2 ch 16)