

2. The Gospel of Mark

Generally thought to be the earliest of the canonical gospels and attributed to Paul's companion Mark,¹ this text is conventionally dated 66-70CE. It was written in Greek - quite possibly in Rome - the author drawing on oral and, probably, early written sources, containing sayings of Jesus as well as accounts of his actions, disputes and prophetic teachings, together with accounts of his crucifixion. It seems that earlier versions of Mark end with the promise that Christ has been raised from the dead, but with no specific post-resurrection accounts of his appearances. These seem to have been added at a later stage.

It is the shortest of the gospels and is marked by the pace with which the action moves forward. It also gives no account of Jesus prior to his ministry but begins with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah and a brief introduction of John the Baptist.

The Beginning

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight'.

John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'²

Notice how clearly and definitely the gospel begins, how punchy it is: 'beginning', 'good news', 'Jesus Christ', 'Son of God'. This is the Christian *act of faith* summed up, and it also sums up the meaning of the whole of the text which will follow: this is *good news* (the Greek word *euangelion* which we translate as 'gospel'). The gospel is - first of all - *good news*, rather than the name of a kind of text. The kind of text this is, is *hagiography* - holy writing - an account of a life meant for instruction and encouragement.

¹ Though, as mentioned, these attributions are considered unreliable - see Session 1

² Mark 1:1-8

In the paragraph that follows, John is called ‘the baptiser’. Some translations use the more conventional ‘the baptist’, whilst - for example - the King James Version says ‘John came baptising...’

Notice how we can gain insight into the text simply by exploring different translations. We read all of scripture in the form of translations (unless we are able ourselves to read Hebrew and Greek) and fragments of original text can contain variants.³ There is no ONE single text, nor one ‘correct’ translation: our translations will move with the ways our languages develop, so we are challenged again and again to return to our sources to explore the meaning of the gospels.

How, then, do we know that the versions we read are ‘true’? The ongoing Tradition of the Church gives us the assurance that we are following the path trodden by generations of Christians before us. Also, in the present day, translations are ‘authorised’ in their varying languages by Bishops’ Conferences in the various parts of the world, giving the *Imprimatur*, their authorisation that the text be published.

So, looking at our text, why ‘baptiser’ rather than ‘baptist’?

One reason is that *baptiser* describes an action - it is more dynamic - and fits the author’s purpose of driving the action forward at pace. Notice also the use of the word ‘And’ to begin sentences, as well as ‘Now’, and - later - words such as ‘immediately’ and ‘suddenly’.

The *forward momentum* of this first text is striking - there is barely a moment to take breath.

And what do we learn?

- that Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecy
- that John has come to announce him, though he is not himself the one promised
- that, already, ‘all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him’ - there is a surge of action
- that John preached repentance to *prepare the way*, but that Jesus would bring the Holy Spirit.

When we pause and examine the gospel text there are deep layers of meaning. We can always examine and interrogate a text and nurture our faith in doing so.

Exercise: Why, do you think, the author immediately offers a quotation from the prophet Isaiah? What does this tell us about his audience? What, do you think, does he want them to understand?

Remember, every detail in the gospel texts is there for a reason: Jesus has not just ‘come’, he has been awaited. He is the fulfilment of God’s Promise.

³ The texts we have and use today are compiled from ancient sources - fragments and earlier compilations and translations. Here, and throughout, we are using the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Catholic Edition (NRSVACE)

The words of Jesus

The gospel account continues with Jesus entering the scene.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'⁴

Notice how concise and dynamic, even exciting, the language is and how the author keeps driving the action forward. How forty days⁵ in the wilderness are summed up in one sentence and how John is set aside so that, now, Jesus is the focus of the action.

And, for the first time, we hear Jesus speak: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'.

We are given a fact - Jesus was baptised in the Jordan by John - so we imagine, perhaps, that the meaning of this baptism was the one John had given: for repentance, for the forgiveness of sins. And yet suddenly we read something more: the Spirit descending on Jesus 'like a dove', and a voice from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'.

We imagine the scene - but notice what the text says: *Jesus* saw the heavens torn apart, saw the Spirit descending, and heard the voice proclaiming him to be God's Son. Suddenly we are *within Jesus' experience*.

Notice also that, so far, we have heard first the voice of the Baptist *preparing the path*, then the voice of God proclaiming Jesus as Son, and then - finally - the voice of Jesus himself. In a very short space, the ground has been laid for the proclamation of the gospel, and - here it comes - summed up in this one sentence on Jesus' lips: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

This is not just any phrase; it is the key to the gospel message:

- the time is ripe
- God's kingship is close by, and
- it is time to think again⁶ and believe.

⁴ Mark 1:9-15

⁵ according to the accounts of Matthew and Luke

⁶ literally the meaning of 'repentance'

The question now arises, as it will again and again:⁷ *Did Jesus actually say these words and did he say them in this place?* In traditional language, it is a question of Jesus' *ipsissima verba*: the precise words of Jesus.

One thing to note, first of all, is that we - today - are rather more concerned about what were and what *may* be the words of Jesus. In the first century many sayings were attributed to Jesus; many are now lost and others appear in various non-canonical (apocryphal) texts.

How can we know what was really said and what really happened?

One clue is to compare how different gospels quote Jesus. Where the similarities are striking, despite the texts having been written at different times and in different places, we feel more assured that they are, more closely, the actual words spoken by Jesus remembered and recorded by his followers because they were significant.

A second clue is one used by scripture scholars: the **style of language** used by Jesus which suggests an underlying use of the original Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. The gospels, as already mentioned, were written in Greek, but they, at times, reflect something of the structure and 'tone' of Jesus' own words.

Thirdly, we can look for phrases and ideas unique to Jesus which may reflect his **style of preaching** - for example, his use of parables and the way he spoke 'with authority' (unlike the scribes), so that people were amazed.⁸

Fourthly, we look to the Tradition of the Church which hands these texts down to us from generation to generation. The Church reverences the words of Jesus contained in these four canonical gospels. It sees them as true to Christ's teaching and close to the heart of the gospel message. Here we are looking for *harmony* across the gospel texts: do they speak *together* the ONE message of God's Word?

In this instance, it is not possible to say that Jesus said exactly these words at exactly this time, but we recognise in them his *voice*, and also the wholeness of the *proclamation* of Jesus, the *kerygma*.⁹

The works and the words of Jesus

The gospel text continues:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother

⁷ It is a question which becomes more difficult in the later, more developed, gospels

⁸ Mark 1:22

⁹ cf. Romans 10:14-17

John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.¹⁰

In the gospel of Mark, as in all the gospels, the actions and teachings of Christ serve to communicate and confirm the key message (*kerygma*) of the early Church, that Jesus came as unique Son of God to bring salvation to the world.

As we shall see later,¹¹ the central experience of the Church, the event which *changed everything*, was **Christ's rising from the dead**. Through this experience, his first followers interpreted and understood the stories of healing and teaching passed down to them.

¹⁰ Mark 1:16-39

¹¹ In Session 6: The Passion and Resurrection Narratives

Notice how it is the ‘unclean spirits’ and demons who recognise the true identity of Jesus. In Mark 3:22 the scribes claim that this is why Jesus is able to cast out these spirits, because he himself is possessed by Beelzebul: ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ The - to us, mad - logic of their words has the ring of authenticity: we hear the echoes of the accusations put against Jesus by those who opposed him.

Notice, also, how central to Jesus’ ministry was the casting out of these spirits, and the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law shows how readily he heals the sick. These actions manifest the coming Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus in Mark 1:15.

Also, the simplicity of the description of how Jesus ‘went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed’ suggests its authenticity to us, and shows how Christ’s actions and teaching were rooted in his own prayer.

Exercise: As you re-read the above extract, what do you notice in the text that confirms Jesus’ identity and drives the action forward at pace? Can you highlight or underline the words and phrases which seem to you to be most important?

Now choose a small section of the above extract and reflect on it more deeply. In what ways does it speak to your heart? What do you notice that, perhaps, you might not have noticed at first?

Gospel rather than history

Truth means more than historical accuracy. As Catholics, we read the gospels seeking Truth: we are able to accept that there are depths of meaning beyond the superficial. In essence, we seek the Truth of the gospel message, the *kerygma*, rooted in the experience of the risen Jesus and summed-up in the first words on Christ’s lips: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’¹²

So, reading the above extract, what do we notice?

- we see events moving forward *at pace* with the calling of the first disciples¹³
- we see Jesus teaching *with authority*
- we see his growing fame
- we see private, as well as public, events: the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law; the healing of many other sick and possessed people
- and we see Jesus go off alone in order to pray, and the turning of his mission towards all the towns of Galilee.

What do we make of this?

¹² Mark 1:15

¹³ an account echoed in the gospels of Matthew and Luke

The success and optimism of the early mission will serve to **contrast** with the darkness and horror of the later part of Christ's ministry, as opposition grew against him and even his own followers came to be scandalised by his teaching.

We see **power** in these acts of healing which serve to support the **authority** of Christ's teaching: this is no mere prophet but God's Son.

We see elements of recollection coming together - both public and private - woven into a fast-paced narrative.

The gospel of Mark is a text which appears simple but which is woven with great precision to serve its purpose: not merely to give a historical account but to **proclaim a message** of hope and salvation to a community of real, living people.

And, indeed, not just to them, but to the generations following and to us and to those who will follow.

This is, indeed, the word which is 'alive and active'.¹⁴

¹⁴ cf. Session 1: What are the Gospels?, and Hebrews 4:12