

Jesus in the Gospel According to Mark

Readings: Mark 1v.1/ Malachi 3v.1/ Isaiah 40.3-5/ + Mk 10.32-45 (Servant King)

Mark, Our Earliest Gospel

Mark was written anonymously by a Greek-speaking Christian outside of Palestine. This Gospel is a compilation of oral traditions, and perhaps written ones, though none of these survive. Mark's Gospel appears to have been written first and was used by Matthew and Luke.

The Beginning of the Gospel: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God Who Fulfills Scripture

The Gospel of Mark was written from a Jewish perspective - is full of wonder, a wonder gradually focusing on the person of Christ. As a whole it falls into two halves, pivoting on the episode at Caesarea Philippi; the first half is devoted to the gradual discovery that he is the Christ, the Messiah, as Peter acknowledges for the first time on that occasion; the second half is devoted to the gradual and painful discovery of the nature of his Messiahship, that it is the way of suffering and rejection.

The gospel is defined not only in the middle, but at both ends as well. The first section and the last are particularly significant. Although the gospel is a gradual process of wondering discovery, this amazement applies primarily to the actors in the drama, and especially to the disciples. To the reader the first section gives the game away. The introductory section is as true an introduction as the Prologue of John or the Infancy Stories of Matthew and Luke, for it sets the scene and informs the reader of the true nature and import of the story to come - he pronounces that this is 'the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (ch.1 v.1)

At the very beginning of his Gospel, the author states that Jesus is the Christ (the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew term "Messiah"), a title that was meaningful only to Jews. In the first century there were a variety of views of the Messiah. Some Jews believed that the Messiah would be a king; others believed that he would be a cosmic judge. All notions about the Messiah (that we know of) presented him as powerful. The problem Mark confronted, though, was the paradox of Jesus as a suffering Messiah.

Mark's Gospel is a Gospel of haste and action.. If you read through his short gospel (and that is something that you might like to think of doing this week), you will find it is written in a decidedly staccato style. The narrative moves at an extraordinary speed, indeed at such speed that Jesus is frequently described as doing one thing after another 'immediately.' Readers - and hearers - in effect have no time to breathe before they are on to the next incident.

Mark begins his Gospel abruptly: it does not open with a birth narrative. Rather, the Gospel begins with John the Baptist's message of the coming Messiah and Jesus' appearance as an adult. Jesus asks John to baptize him and, after his baptism, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness where Satan tempts him. He returns victorious and begins his public ministry preaching the coming kingdom of God. Mark introduces Jesus as '*the Son of God*', a term that would have been meaningful to Jews and Gentiles alike. Most readers/hearers of the Gospel would associate Jesus with other sons of God - teachers, prophets, miracle workers.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Son of God who has Authority'.....

An atmosphere of awe and wonder pervades the gospel, a feeling that Jesus is more than an ordinary human being. This is sometimes in reaction to his deeds, sometimes consequent upon what he does not do.

- When he calls the first disciples they follow without question, no explanation being given or needed; they seem simply to be drawn by his personality (1.18, 20; 2.14). Luke modifies this to give some previous miracles which explain their response (Lk 5.1-11). When Jesus gives the disciples authority, they go off without question to execute his mission (Mk 6.7). When he sends the disciples to commandeer a mount, they depart without question and the owners respond without hesitation (11.1-5).

- His authority is remarkable: 1.22 '*He made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught with authority*'. '*Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it*' (1.27). '*Even the wind and the sea obey him*' (4.41). Mark tells the story of Jesus calming the waters when the disciples were afraid for their lives, & follows it with the feeding of the 5,000 - Mark does this intentionally... He wants us to equate it with Moses's parting of the seas & providing for his people in the desert - Mark shows Jesus as more than Moses - only God controls the seas! It is not only among the simple country folk that his unquestioning and unquestioned authority prevails. He commands always like one whose orders cannot be questioned. Questioners come to him, asking for decisions on all kinds of issues, fasting, payment of tribute, interpretation of scripture. On the occasion when his authority is challenged (11.27-33), he is not at all shaken, but leaves his challengers themselves confused and challenged. '*After that, no one dared to question him any more*' (12.34).

Mark's Jesus is authoritative: He has the authority to forgive sins (2.10), He has authority over the Sabbath (2.28) he calls disciples and they follow him; people are amazed and listen attentively when he speaks; even unclean spirits obey his commands. Despite all of this, Jesus is misunderstood by all and is hated by the Jewish leaders.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Opposed Son of God'.....

According to Mark, the religious leadership opposed Jesus from the beginning, and this antagonism culminated with his execution. Despite this animosity, Jesus never opposed Judaism as a religion. Even though the religious leaders challenged (and were offended by) Jesus' interpretation of the Law, Mark continued to portray Jesus as the Jewish Messiah.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Misunderstood Son of God'....

In the first half of the Gospel, only five individuals or groups know Jesus' identity: God, Jesus, the evil spirits, the author, and the reader. Not even his closest disciples understand who he is. It is not, in fact, until the middle of the Gospel that his disciples begin to realize that Jesus is the Son of God.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Acknowledged Son of God'....

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" *Peter responded, "You are the Christ."* This is the first time in the Gospel of Mark that one of Jesus' followers identifies Jesus. It is not a full recognition, though, since Peter immediately chastises Jesus for prophesying his passion.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Suffering Son of God'....

Jesus predicts his death three times in this Gospel, and the latter part of Mark's Gospel focuses exclusively on Jesus' passion. Mark explains that it is precisely because Jesus is the Messiah that he must die: his death is the sacrifice that atones for humanity's sin.

Mark is quite evidently convinced that Jesus is the Son of God, the suffering Son of Man, and the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, but his Gospel message sees no contradiction between Jesus' humanity and His divine identity. Although, in contrast to Matthew and Luke, this Gospel lacks an infancy narrative and also has no poetic vision of "pre-existence," unlike John, Mark is a down-to-earth portrayal of an eschatological prophet, sent by God as His unique Son, to accomplish an important mission through the shedding of His own blood in an ignominious death on the cross.

Without ever using the same words, Mark's Gospel affirms what the Letter to the Hebrews professes about Jesus Christ in these two passages:

- *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).*
- *"He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since He himself is subject to weakness. . . (Heb 5:2).*

Mark's Gospel. Like these words in Hebrews show the essential truth of the faith: Jesus is one like us in every way except sin, and that includes the range of human emotions and even limitations.

Granted, this stance has always caused difficulty in Christian history. From a logical standpoint, one cannot be both God and human, for the God part seemingly has to overwhelm the human part, since one cannot limit God. Yet the constant testimony of the faith, enshrined in the ancient ecumenical Creeds of the Church is that Jesus was both God and man, and He experienced human life like all other human beings. He got hungry, thirsty and tired. He liked some people better than others (*a preference for the poor and weak!*), and He could get angry. Mark shows in story form what the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims by faith.

Mark's Jesus is 'the Crucified Son of God'....

Even at the end, Jesus' disciples do not understand his identity and mission....

..... Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and the others scatter to avoid arrest.... Jesus is left to die alone, wondering if God also has abandoned him.

Mark uses two events at Jesus' death to illustrate the reality of Jesus' Messiahship:

First, when Jesus dies, the curtain around the Holy of Holies tears. Through this story, Mark implies that after Jesus' death, all people, not just the high priest, have full access to God.

Second, and even more striking, is the pagan soldier at the cross who recognizes Jesus and confesses that he is God's Son. Throughout the Gospel, all of the Jews, including Jesus' closest followers, fail to recognize Jesus' Messiahship. Ironically, it is a pagan who first confesses this truth... *'And when the Centurion who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God"..' (15.39)*

Mark's Jesus is 'the Vindicated Son of God'....

.... And so, Mark ends his Gospel as he began it : '...this man was the Son of God'... And Mark is as abrupt at the end as he was in his beginning, and throughout: The day after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. A young man told them that Jesus had been raised and instructed them to tell the disciples. Mark says that the women said nothing because they were afraid. The ending of his Gospel has often caused readers dismay; so much so that some scribes added an ending that described Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. Modern scholars agree that these additional 12 verses are secondary....

Thus the last movement of Mark's Gospel answers to, and mirrors, the first as Jesus' Divine Sonship is established in a new way and recognised at His resurrection. Throughout his Gospel, Mark emphasises and expresses the dynamic of Jesus' full participation in both the divine and human dimensions of life: Jesus is truly human and truly Divine; He is the suffering servant who is sacrificed on the cross and vindicated with the "name above every other name."

Conclusion:

Seeing and gaining understanding of Jesus in each of the 4 Gospels is your journey for this, and the next 3 Sundays.... You will realise that what you have at the conclusion of these 4 weeks is not just one melody, so to speak, but a much more complex composition of 4 distinct - yet harmonious - melodies that all contribute to a proper, greater, deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, Son of God - both human and Divine...

Today we let Mark's melody predominate - - I hope and pray that, at the conclusion of these 4 Sundays, you will hear a composition made beautiful in a truly Divine 4-part harmony..

May God, in Christ, bless your journey by the power of His Holy and Life Giving Spirit, Amen