

MARK –THE MYSTERY GOSPEL?

Mark is this year's lead Gospel for readings at the main service.
What do we know about it?

Who wrote it?

The Gospel itself is silent. Longstanding tradition attributes it to John Mark, the companion of Paul on many of his missionary journeys. Was he also the young man who ran away naked from Gethsemane (Mk.15.51-52), which would make him in part an eye witness? Tradition also holds that Mark used the recollections of Peter as the basis of his work. In truth, we really do not know.

The beginning

The first words are : **"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"**

(Gospel=Good news=evangelion).

Is this just a way of saying "the book starts here"? or that this is where each reader's search for the Good News begins? And right from the start you, the reader, know who Jesus is. But the characters in the gospel have to find this out. Rather like a who-dunnit where you know the murderer but the detective has to find out. Not so much a who-dunnit as a who-was-he. For Mark, the real question is –who was Jesus? And the gospel shows the truth being granted in turn:

- to Jesus himself at his baptism (Mk.1.10-11 –NB Mark states that the Spirit was seen by Jesus, not the others present)
- to the evil spirit (Mk.1.24)
- to the disciples (Mk.8.27-30 and 9.2-7)
- to the faithful Jewish crowd (Mk.11.9-10) and finally
- to the Centurion at the cross, a symbol of the gentiles and the Empire (Mk.15.39)

When was it written?

Most scholars now think that Mark was the first Gospel to be written (and that Matthew and Luke used his text and added their own material and interpretation). It was probably written in Greek (like all the New Testament) in the 60s or 70s AD (therefore later than Paul's Epistles) and quite likely in or for the Christian community in Rome.

The ending

There is a puzzle about the end of Mark's gospel. The original manuscripts end with the women running away from the empty tomb and telling nobody because they were afraid (Mk.16.8). That is not much like the happy ending to a Good News story. Does the author assume his readers are so inspired by the resurrection that he doesn't feel the need to spell it out or does he expect his readers to work out the end for themselves on the basis of their own spiritual experience of the risen Lord? Or to make you ask "Well, if they didn't tell anybody, how does the author know" and thus realise that there must be more? After all, if we hear the full Easter story and are not moved or changed by it, do we have the Good News?

Or is just a mistake. Maybe the evangelist died before he could finish. Maybe the last page fell off the original manuscript.

Anyway, other manuscripts add another 11 verses with resurrection appearances and the Ascension.

A macabre footnote

Theme

Mark is the shortest gospel and has a breathless urgency. The narrative rushes on from one episode to another, frequently connected by "euthus" –at once. There is no elegance in the language and there is an emphasis on suffering and on service:

"The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to surrender his life as a ransom for many." (Mk.10.45).

It is no use for a nativity play – Mark makes no mention at all of Jesus' birth. But more than one third of the whole book is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. There are some details of the passion story only found in Mark.

-**The donkey** for Palm Sunday is found tied up outside by a door in a street with houses on both sides (or it could possibly mean "at a road junction")(Mk.11.4)

-**In Gethsemane**, one of Jesus' followers is a young man whom the guards try to seize but they can only hold onto his robe and he escapes naked.(Mk.14.51-52)

-**Simon of Cyrene** who is forced to carry Jesus' cross is the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mk.15.21).

In the bible, men are usually identified by who their father was, not who their children are, so the assumption has to be that Alexander and Rufus were known to the Christians for whom Mark's gospel was written.

By tradition, Saint Mark founded the church in Alexandria in Egypt and was their bishop.

His body was preserved in the cathedral there. Centuries later, Venice had become a rich and aggressive sea power. In 828, a Venetian commando was sent to steal St Mark's body for their new basilica – now St Mark's. To discourage investigation by the Muslim Arabs who then ruled Alexandria, for the return to Venice the body was covered by sides of pork. (This is NOT gospel and there is even controversy about how much of the body the Venetians managed to steal.)