

CHAPTER 1

THE PRELUDE

Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, testifies around 135 AD that “Mark became the interpreter of Peter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed in order of the things said and done by the Lord.” Today, we call this work spoken of by Papias the “*Gospel of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ According to Saint Mark*”. Tradition affirms the author to be the John Mark mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

Mark writes in Rome sometime after 64 AD. He writes in Greek, the universal language of the day. Mark intends his gospel account mainly for Gentile converts who face unpopularity and persecution from the state because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He writes to support the faith of persecuted Christians. Mark reveals to his readers the life of suffering Jesus endures and the death He undergoes. In Mark’s gospel account, Jesus warns His disciples that they will be treated no better than their Lord. They too, as His disciples, will suffer for His name’s sake, but, as they persevere in sharing in His sufferings, they one day would also share in His glory. Mark's gospel narrative is called “the martyrs Gospel” as it is written to encourage Christians faced with the possibility of having to die for their belief. Already the sounds of the lions are heard in the arena.

CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The early Church is not so much interested in the life of Jesus, but what deeds constitute the “good news”, in other words, what contributes to the salvation of mankind and establishes the kingdom of God. It is for this reason the Death and Resurrection of Jesus are the essentials of the Gospel. The death of Jesus is interpreted as the sacrifice which takes away the sin of the world. By the time this gospel account was being written, much information existed as Christian Tradition in the form of independent and unrelated stories.

Not all Christian teachings are drawn from the earthly life of Jesus. Christian prophets also play a part in creating Christian Tradition. It is taken for granted that in the early apostolic times the heavenly Jesus continued to reveal to the Church truths about Himself. The very night before His death Jesus said to the Apostles, *“I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But, when he comes, the Spirit of Truth, he will guide you to all truth”* (Jn 16:12-13). The Church sees no real distinction between the Jesus who reveals while on earth, and the Jesus who reveals from heaven through the Christian Prophets as ministers of the Holy Spirit. Certain truths realized after the Resurrection, such as the divine son-ship of Jesus, find their way into the teachings of the earthly life of Jesus, when in reality they are revealed after the Resurrection. These teachings belong to what is called the “Easter Faith”.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE

Papias informs us that Mark is the interpreter of Simon Peter. The Acts of the Apostles preserve a sample of the preaching of Peter, and most probably preserve the style in which the early Church proclaims the Gospel. The sermon of Peter can serve as an outline for Mark's written account of the Gospel. Mark immediately begins with the baptism of Jesus by John, and continues with eight chapters of miracles and exorcisms that prove the claim of the Gospel: the kingdom of God is present on earth in Jesus of Nazareth.

Mark's own religious background and expectations certainly influence his selection and presentation of material. Mark regards Jesus as God's agent, sent to begin the great and final battle against the powers of evil. Mark manifests this in the temptation scene, in Jesus' casting out demons, in calming the sea, and in Jesus' success in silencing His human opponents whom Mark regards as agents of the devil.

Mark presents Satan as the agent who snatches the Word of God out of the heart of the hearer. Satan opposes the Gospel message. For the message of the Gospel to take root, and for the mission of Jesus to be successful, the power of Satan must be destroyed. God's reign threatens the kingdom of darkness and provokes its evil force into battle. Jesus appears as the One who proclaims the “good news” and expels the evil forces. Those who follow Him must do the same.

THE ROLE OF MIRACLES

Some scholars believe that Mark wrote in order to correct an erroneous image of Jesus, which certain Christians fostered. They popularized Jesus as a Wonder Worker. Some men and women found this image very appealing to their spirits, but it certainly was not one that would prepare men and women for martyrdom. Both Greek and Jewish literature abounds with the fame of such men as they attempted to promote this very inaccurate image of Jesus' mission.

Mark recorded the miraculous deeds Jesus accomplished during His ministry. Mark did so because it was well known that Jesus worked miracles and expelled demons. These were signs of the presence of God's reign in Jesus of Nazareth. However, to see Jesus merely as a wonder worker, and to think these marvels constitute the essence of His mission is to be badly misled. Jesus, as Mark presented Him, had no intention of establishing His claim as Messiah or as God's Son on the basis of His miraculous activities.

Mark used miracle stories within the Gospel, but not without interpreting them. We see in the very beginning of Mark's Gospel that Mark associated the healing of a paralytic with the power of Jesus' words to take away the sins of people. The placement of this episode in the early part of the Gospel may be giving the readers the key for interpreting the miracles that follow. This miracle indicates to the readers that divine power is in the words of Jesus as well as present in miraculous deeds. The purpose of the miracles is to lead people to believe in the power of the Word!

MARK AND THE CROSS

Mark's narrative centers on the very Person of Jesus. Mark was overwhelmed by the life Jesus lived--a life filled with suffering and ending in a scandalous death on the Cross. In the mind of Mark, it is Jesus' life on earth and in particular the ending of His life on the Cross that reveals *all*. We will see, after a long narration of the Passion, that the Gospel abruptly ends. Mark leaves his reader with the taste of the Cross in their mouth. Or better still, pondering in their heart the meaning and mystery of the sufferings and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Mark does not permit the Easter Joy to eclipse the importance of the Cross of Christ. The essence of Mark's Gospel account could be summed up in Paul's proclamation, "*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1Cor 2:2).

A GOSPEL SOURCE

The Gospel account of Mark serves as a major source for both of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark's version of the Gospel is the earliest and shortest Gospel presentation with 661 verses. Matthew's version, written around 85 AD, has 1,069 verses of which 606 verses pertain to Mark's account, incorporating all but 55 verses of the First Gospel. The Gospel narrative by Luke, composed around 90 AD, contains 1,149 verses. Luke reproduces 320 verses from Mark; 24 of these do not appear in Matthew. Therefore, we are left with only 31 of Mark's verses not appearing in either Matthew or Luke.

As we study the Gospel according to Mark, it will be interesting to note the changes his material underwent at the hands of Matthew and Luke, as they adapted the material for their own purposes. This will give us an insight as to how the Evangelists used the traditional material at hand in composing their presentation of the Gospel.

The Gospel according to Mark is probably the purest presentation of Jesus of Nazareth the Church possesses!

THE GOOD NEWS

Mark's use of the word "gospel" is unique among the four Evangelists. He may have introduced the word into the tradition about Jesus. *Gospel* means "good tidings", and is derived from the Greek word *evangelion*. In classic Greek the word signifies "good news", particularly news of victory. In Roman times, "gospel" applied to the news of the birth of an heir to Caesar or the ascension of a Caesar to the throne. Mark possibly desired to indicate the lordship of Jesus Christ to the Romans by the use of the word "gospel".

Mark equated the Gospel with Jesus. Jesus Christ is the “good news”. The object of the Gospel is Jesus: the power, the passion, the glory of Jesus. It is more than a book that merely recites the events in the life of Jesus. It is the words, the deeds, the death and Resurrection that present Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God--the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Cross of Jesus is central to the Gospel; it proclaims the good news of God's grace and salvation. The Cross is the Wisdom of God.

The words of the Gospel are alive and spirit filled. The power of Jesus operates through the Gospel. When the Gospel is proclaimed, Jesus is present in power to save those who hear and believe. In other words, when the saving words and deeds of Jesus are proclaimed on the authority of God, the Gospel has the divine power to save a sinner's life. Recall the words in the Book of Hebrews, *“Indeed, the word is of God is living and effective, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow; and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12).*

When Mark wrote *“The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ [the Son of God],”* he did not wish to imply the beginning of a book, or even a biography of a person, but the beginning of the saving act of God in the public life of Jesus of Nazareth. He intended to convey to his readers that this same godly power and presence manifested in the earthly life of Jesus, is still present among those who hear the Gospel in faith and accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ! Wherever the words and deeds are retold in faith, the power of Jesus is present to save. The Gospel is not merely an announcement of what God *did* in Jesus, but what God is *doing* in Jesus!

PRELUDE

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

WE HAVE NOT RECEIVED THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD BUT THE SPIRIT THAT IS FROM GOD, SO THAT WE MAY UNDERSTAND THE THINGS FREELY GIVEN US BY GOD. (1Cor 2:12)

FIRST DAY: Read Acts 2:22-41.

- 1. For whom did Mark write?**
- 2. What message did he desire to communicate to the disciples of Jesus?**
- 3. What do you see to be the heart of the Good News in Peter's sermon?**
- 4. In Peter's mind, how should a hearer respond to the Gospel?**

SECOND DAY: Read Acts 10:34-48.

- 1. For whom does Peter see the Gospel written?**
- 2. What do you see is the “good news of peace” proclaimed by Jesus?**
- 3. How is the power of the Gospel illustrated in this reading?**
- 4. What is meant by the Church's “Easter Faith”?**

THIRD DAY: Read 1Thessalonians 2:1-20.

- 1. How did the “Easter Faith” affect the writing of the Gospel?**
- 2. To what does Paul attribute the conversions of the Thessalonians?**
- 3. What do you think Paul means by verse 13?**
- 4. In Paul's mind, who hinders the spread of the Gospel?**

FOURTH DAY: Read Hebrews 2:1-18.

- 1. What works described here demonstrate the Gospel to be divine?**
- 2. What is our first obligation to the Gospel message?**
- 3. What are the effects here of the sufferings and death of Jesus?**
- 4. How does Mark desire to interpret the miracles in Jesus' life?**

FIFTH DAY: Read 1Corinthians 2:1-16.

- 1. To what does Paul attribute the success of his preaching in Corinth?**
- 2. Why are certain persons able to understand and believe in the Gospel?**
- 3. How do you understand verse 14?**
- 4. How can you prepare yourself to be more receptive to the Gospel?**

SIXTH DAY: Read the First Letter of Peter 1:13-2:12.

- 1. What does being obedient to the truth mean to you?**
- 2. When a person experiences the love of God what should they do?**
- 3. Why does the Gospel have the power to change lives?**
- 4. How can the study of the Scriptures aid you to “grow into salvation”?**