

A WHISTLESTOP TOUR OF MARK

by David McLoughlin



Mark's is the first of the written gospels, dated sometime between 60-70 AD. It establishes the life of Jesus as a story form. Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source in their composition and it's probable that even John knew something of Mark in tradition.

For Mark, Jesus is mysterious, and that's very important to his way of telling the story. At times, he intentionally keeps people from understanding who he really is. Jesus actually silences the demons who would announce his true identity. When he performs a miracle he tells people not to say anything to anyone about what he has done. He even takes the disciples away, off into a corner, and teaches them privately so that others won't hear and understand the message. Now, why does Mark tell the story this way? He uses this motif of secrecy and misunderstanding as a way of re-thinking the image of Jesus. It perhaps has something to do with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Why had it all happened? Mark tells the story in such a way to make sense out of that, in the light of the death of Jesus.

Chapter 1 verse 1... "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God..." We are so used to these words we don't really hear them. But the first time the gospel was read in public this would have been dynamite. Read in certain circles this could be seen as a declaration of regime change! Dangerous stuff!

Mark has certain literary techniques

The Sandwich: He puts one story inside two halves of another to interpret it in a particular way or emphasise it or to make a contrast e.g. *Mark 11:12-25* - the cursing of the fig tree and the withering of the fig tree sandwiches the cleansing of the temple, and symbolises and emphasises the barrenness of Israel.

Mark 14:53-72 - Peter's denial sandwiches Jesus before the High Priest highlighting the contrast between Jesus' steadfastness and Peter's failure.

Mark also has a particular way of using threes – triple repetition as in folk tales e.g. 'The Three Bears' etc.

- The three accusations of Jesus before the High Priest
- Peter's three denials
- Pilate's three appeals to the crowd emphasising Jesus' innocence
- The three divisions of time at the crucifixion in 15:25 onwards, relating to the third, sixth and ninth hours.

His style and vocabulary

He writes in the Greek of the ordinary street people of the Roman Empire. Matthew and Luke smarten up his style a bit when they use him. He uses short sentences linked by 'and' (26 times) or 'again'. It feels breathless like a story told by a child. He emphasises with repetition "That evening, after sunset..." in 1:32; "In the morning, long before dawn..." in 1:35. He uses afterthoughts to clarify what has just happened "...for they were fishermen." in 1:16; "...for there were many of them among his followers." in 2:15.

Mark is good at visualising scenes and adds little touches that fix them in the memory. He alone speaks of: Jesus sleeping with his head on the cushion in the boat in the storm in 4:38; the sad actions of the Gerasene demoniac in 5:3-8; the little girl Jesus has raised now walking about in 5:42; John the Baptist's gruesome head on a dish in 6:28. Mark has taken the memories of the community, perhaps of Peter, and given them a storyteller's turn.

Two important markers

- Suffering and persecution
- The disciples' failure to understand Jesus' message

Jesus is not just a powerful miracle worker, he is also a suffering Messiah. And suffering is not necessarily a curse of God but maybe something that the disciples of Jesus also have to share.

If even the first disciples can misunderstand Jesus then maybe those who come after may do too!

Further reading:

Henry Wansbrough (1996) *The Lion and the Bull: The Gospels of Mark and Luke*. London: DLT

Rowan Williams (2014) *Meeting God in Mark*, London: SPCK

David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, (2012) *Mark as Story: an introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Further useful material can be found on these websites:

www.ntgateway.com

www.usccb.org/bible/mk/3:22

www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-mark/

David McLoughlin is Emeritus Fellow of Christian Theology at Newman University, Birmingham.

The disciples

Mark makes us, the readers, aware from the beginning that Jesus is the Messiah in 1:1, compare the heavenly voice at his baptism and the Transfiguration, and the declarations of the unclean spirits. But the poor old disciples get it wrong again and again. So we sort of have two stories here - Mark's message for us and Mark telling us how it was then. Mark gives us the privilege of hindsight.

The disciples' failure gets worse through the gospel. Even when Peter does recognise Jesus, as the Messiah, he fails and tempts Jesus the way Satan does in 8:29-33. Matthew and Luke will try and give the benefit of the doubt to the Christian leaders but Mark is no such respecter of persons. Again Mark lets us in on what is really happening early on. The first clash with the Pharisees in 2:1-3:6 ends with the threat of death: "The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodians against him." The threat of the passion hangs over the whole Gospel as does the collusion of the court of Herod with the Religious leaders. Mark's Jesus is offensive to State and Religion.

Even when Jesus himself prophesies the passion three times, each time in 8:31, 9:31 and 10:33, the disciples fail to understand and Jesus insists they must follow his path.

1. Peter says let's go back to Galilee and Jesus replies "Get behind me Satan!" and says the disciples must renounce themselves and follow him, that is, his way in Mark 8:33.
2. They argue about precedence in the Kingdom in 9:34 and Jesus replies: "If anyone wants to be first he must make himself last" 9:35.
3. The sons of Zebedee ask for the chief places in the Kingdom in 10:35. Jesus offers his own cup of suffering.

Mark emphasises Jesus' insistence to follow him from the very beginning of the Gospel, from when he highlights the attentiveness and willingness of the disciples to follow as opposed to Jesus' blood relations in 3:31-35. Gradually, Mark also shows it is outsiders who see Jesus for who he is, the woman with the haemorrhage of blood in 5:25-34, the Syro-Phoenician woman in 7:24-30; the father of the epileptic boy who the disciples can't cure in 9:14-29; people bring little children whom the disciples scold in 10:13-16; the sons of Zebedee revealing their naked ambition in 10:35 and blind Bartimaeus shouting out his faith in 10:46-52 on the road out of Jericho; the woman at Bethany who pours perfumed ointment over his feet (effectively preparing him for his coming death) in 14:3-9 while the disciples are indignant thinking only of how much money it would raise; Simon of Cyrene carrying his cross as all his friends have deserted him in 15:21; and Joseph of Arimathea fulfilling what should have been the family role of burying him in 15:42-46.

Mark shows it's easy to respond generously to Jesus initially but then when difficulties come it's not so easy (just like in the parable of the sower in 4:16). Mark stresses faithfulness in the face of persecution and the dignity and humility of service as opposed to status seeking. Which makes us wonder what was going on in the early Christian community for Mark to rub their noses in this? Mark's gospel is full of awe, focusing on the person of Jesus from the opening sentence to the cry of the foreign Centurion at the foot of the cross "In truth this man was the Son of God" 15:39. His Gospel is the working out of what that cry means.