

INTRODUCTION TO MARK'S GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-8 [MW21-06]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 14 February 2021

A soap manufacturer and a Vicar were walking together down a street in a large city. The soap manufacturer casually said, "The gospel you preach hasn't done much good, has it? Just observe. There is still a lot of wickedness in the world, and a lot of wicked people too!" The Vicar made no reply until they passed a dirty little child making mud pies in the gutter. Seizing the opportunity the Vicar said, "I see soap hasn't done much good in the world; for there is much dirt and many dirty people around." The soap manufacturer replied, "Oh, well, soap is only useful when it is applied." And the Vicar said, "Exactly! So it is with the gospel."

What is "gospel"?

- I invite you, encourage you to brainstorm with those around you come up with everything you can think of about "gospel"

[space]

Okay then, let's spill it - what is "gospel" ... what can we say about "gospel"?

Thanks for that

- that's really opened things up
maybe it's even given us a few hooks to hang things on

Jesus made an impact on people

- even while he was engaged in his earthly ministry people began to tell and pass on stories about what Jesus had done and said
- this certainly increased and took on new energy after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection

There were lots of traditions that sprang up

- stories that were told and passed on by word of mouth
some incidents that were written down
- collections of sayings and teachings
preaching and teaching about Jesus from meetings of the followers
- all these began to circulate in the way important information did in those days

I guess in some ways it was similar to how people

- send stories and interesting snippets of information by email today
or how unusual events and pictures are broadcast over the 'net'

There would have been some generally agreed account of Jesus' "passion"

- "passion" being the events of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion
and there were very early on formularised or liturgical statements of Jesus' resurrection

Try to imagine all these scraps of information swimming around

- particular groups holding to certain traditions about Jesus
and having their favourite stories
- a variety of accounts of things Jesus had said and done
a story here, a tradition there
a liturgical formulation over there, some preaching here

Mark's claim to fame is to be, as far as we know

- the first person to take all these different stories, sayings, traditions collections, liturgical formulations and make something new
- something entirely unique
- something we call a "gospel"

Mark's opening line lays it all out: Mark 1:1

- *"This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"*
- bang! right into it!

Now we might think of "gospel" like a book or story - complete and entire

- what it seems more likely Mark is intending is to say:
this is the collection of news, the presentation of the preaching about Jesus Christ

In the ancient world it was not unusual to write about famous people

- there are numerous accounts of the lives of famous people however they are nothing like "biographies" as we know them
- they most definitely do not 'reveal all'!
these accounts don't tell you anything about the person before they were famous and they were specifically designed to idealise their subject
- the hero was praised, enemies were condemned
there was no explanation of influences, no critical enquiry
- and the narrative style paid no attention at all to locale, time or chronology

Only on this last point – locale, time, chronology – does Mark's writing show any similarity

- to contemporary narratives of famous people
it is generally agreed that Mark created a very general outline of the life of Jesus into which he fitted independent stories, sayings and so on ...

Mark tells the story of a famous person: Jesus

- and does it in a wholly unique way
for Mark's hero, Jesus, does not triumph in the way heroes are supposed to!
- the story ends with death
Mark highlights the triumph of suffering
his whole narrative is shot through with ambiguity

For example, Mark makes a huge deal out of the "hiddenness" of Jesus

- of people not knowing who Jesus is
struggling to understand what Jesus means
- Mark presents the life and deeds of his famous person, Jesus seen in the light of the cross
- the significance of Jesus' actions can only be understood when they are seen as the deeds of the Son of Man who came to suffer

It is fairly generally accepted that Mark's gospel was written around 65-70 AD in Rome

- and follows the teaching of Peter
that's the disciple Peter, who was martyred in 64 AD
- about 110AD a bishop called Papias wrote this:

Mark was an interpreter of Peter and wrote down carefully what he remembered – though not in order – what was said and done by the Lord. He had in fact neither heard the Lord, nor followed him; but later on ... he followed Peter

Mark's gospel has been described as the Gospel of before Easter

- did you get that: *before* Easter!
this gospel shows us Jesus through the eyes of Peter
as he follows his Master on the roads of Palestine
- retelling the life of Jesus, in the light of Easter

Anyone read Mark's gospel?

- ever read it all at once, in one sitting?
anyone read it recently
- any thoughts, comments, observations

For the next couple of weeks we'll be focussing on Mark's gospel

- my suggestion, my encouragement, is to read Mark's gospel
read it through in one go if you can
- then go back and read a bit at a time, you might just be surprised!

A friend told me of a group of TV and media people in Wellington, non-Christians

- who were invited to study Mark's gospel
they would read a chapter then gather to discuss, ask questions, share insights
- at least half became followers of Jesus as a result!

Imagine the gospel of Mark as a piece of woven cloth

- let's examine the main strands in the design

Peter's confession in Mark 8:27 is pivotal

- Jesus asked the disciples: "Who do you say I am?"
"you are the Messiah!" Peter replied
before this point only the readers and the demons know that Jesus is the Son of God
- afterwards the disciples know that Jesus is the Messiah
but fail to understand why it is necessary for the Messiah to suffer
- and just five verses later Peter is severely reprimanded by Jesus

Key themes to look for in Mark's gospel are:

- Jesus' public miracle working
- Jesus' authority to annul Jewish law
- the centrality of suffering
- the progressive revelation of Jesus' identity
- and there is one other rather surprising stand out theme:
fear and misunderstanding
- Mark persistently portrays the disciples as not understanding Jesus, and being afraid

The miraculous power of Jesus frightens the disciples

- this is especially so when Jesus calms the storm, walks on water
and at the transfiguration
- Jesus' teaching also frightens the disciples
especially his predictions of suffering and death
- it seems that in Mark's gospel, people's first reaction to Jesus is fear or amazement
and no one is saved by Jesus unless they get beyond that roadblock

Two major topics dominate Mark's gospel

- and are as real and as important for us today as they were back then:
1: who is Jesus? and 2: what does it mean to be Jesus' disciple?
- the 'answer' to this lies in Mark's presentation of Jesus, which combines two things:
great power and authority
alongside hiddenness, secrecy, suffering
- they do not fit easily together, yet Mark insists on both of them

Mark's picture of the disciples is fairly unflattering

- the disciples are asked to suffer as Jesus has done
however they do not understand
- Jesus rebukes them for not understanding the parables
the miracle of the loaves, the necessity of his suffering and death
- the disciples fail to ask about resurrection
and in fact are more interested in competing for places of honour
- they are not even as good at exorcism in the name of Jesus
as an unknown person who is not even a disciple!

The disciples seem a thoroughly incompetent bunch

- yet they are entrusted with the mission
and given the mystery of the kingdom of God ... Whew!

We can't know what Mark had in mind when he was writing

- however the thought is this portrayal of the disciples
would encourage the believers in Mark's church (and of course subsequent readers)
- everyone knows that the disciples eventually became:
strong, faithful, courageous preachers and healers
- but people might be tempted to think they did so
because of special endowments from birth
(that was the usual explanation in ancient biographies)

Not so says Mark

- the disciples' success is not due to any inherent abilities
rather it is due to the same Spirit that assists any Christian in times of difficulty and trial

Mark especially speaks to non-believers

- or to those whose faith is weak
Mark wants to lead them from: "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ ..."
to join the Gentile at the foot of the cross proclaiming: *Jesus truly is the Son of God*
- it is no matter of chance that the finest confession of faith
occurs not to a Jewish teacher or priest- not even to a disciple
- rather it occurs on the lips of an unknown Roman soldier who said:
"This man really was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39)

Etienne Charpentier makes this comment in *How to read the New Testament*

... at the foot of the cross a Gentile takes over and finally recognises Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus, condemned by the Sanhedrin, and the centurion, over the corpse of a crucified man, tell us the journey that has to be made for the confession of faith to be true. And by means of this drama, Mark continues to make us ask questions. Jesus is disconcerting! Are you ready to die to the idea you have of him, in order to accept him as he is?

Read Mark, meet Jesus, go on the journey ...