

22nd November 2015
Sermon by Rev Gregor Henderson
Mark, and Christ the King

Mark 1:1-11, Mark 15:25-39

Wesley Canberra 10.30am, 22nd November 2015 – Gregor Henderson

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Since the beginning of this Christian year on Advent Sunday, 30th November 2014, our lectionary, our Bible reading plan, followed by around 75% of churches across the world, has focussed for its gospel readings on Mark. From next week it will be the year of Luke, and in another 12 months the year of Matthew. Readings from John's gospel are spread through all 3 years of the lectionary cycle. Of the 52 Sundays in this past year, 34 of the gospel readings have been from Mark. So today, at the end of the year of Mark, I'm taking the opportunity to give an overview of the whole gospel.

First thing to notice is that in Mark there's no Christmas and very little Easter. So in the seasons of Christmas and Easter, there's virtually no readings from Mark. Mark is silent on those events, other than the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. In fact a strong case can be made that the original ending of Mark was lost soon after Mark had completed writing it, because our current manuscripts finish very abruptly with the women fleeing from the empty tomb in amazement and terror and fear – an odd ending. No appearances of the risen Christ in Mark. No ascension of the risen Christ into heaven. One of the great dreams of Biblical scholars is that the extra papyrus page or two probably written by Mark may yet turn up in some Middle Eastern archaeological dig.

For me, Mark has to be the most important writer and the most important book in the whole Bible. For he is the first gospel writer, the first to put together the stories about Jesus' ministry and teaching. His achievement is monumental, and fortunately his gospel inspired others to do the same – Matthew, Luke and John among them – with the additions of extra events like Christmas and resurrection appearances and extra teachings like the sermon on the mount and the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Without Mark's genius and example to others we would know very little about Jesus' life on earth, and quite possibly Christianity would have died out after just a hundred years or so.

So let's examine Mark's genius. Mark gives us a coherent narrative about Jesus, from his baptism and commencement of ministry, to his death and the discovery of the empty tomb. Before Mark the stories about Jesus circulated only by word of mouth around the small Christian congregations spread across Palestine, Asia Minor, Egypt, North Africa, Greece and Italy, with different congregations knowing different stories and learning new ones from the passing preachers and missionaries. But no-one had recorded them, save possibly some writing down of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, for they expected the world to come to an end in their generation.

Mark deliberately gathers as many of these different stories as he can, and then he links them together in a coherent organised fashion, to make of it all what he calls a gospel, good news. He's truly inspired. Let's have a quick look at how he shapes it. You will be helped by taking the Bible in front of you and turning to the gospel of Mark.

You will see that Mark commences with the simple declaration in 1:1 that this is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Then the ministry of John the Baptist, then the baptism of Jesus. The baptism is only 3 verses, but they are packed with astonishing news of what's now happening in this new age of Jesus – see how the heavens are torn apart, God is now accessible; how the Spirit of God comes upon Jesus, God's power now available; and how God speaks words of love and pleasure to Jesus, revealing himself as a God of love and joy.

Now jump to 8:27-30. This is the fulcrum, the turning point of Mark's writing, both geographically and theologically. Geographically, Jesus and his disciples are at the northernmost part of their travels, in Caesarea Philippi. From there they steadily head south to the fate awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem. Theologically, the conversation in 8:27-30 results in the first confession of faith by one of Jesus' disciples – Peter says "You are the Messiah", finally recognising Jesus as the long-awaited servant and messenger from God. Matthew's version adds a bit more to Peter's declaration "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God".

What happens then in the first half of the gospel? Mark strings together the events and teaching of Jesus in such a way that the reader has revealed to him or her who Jesus really is, with Peter finally stating the bleeding obvious in chapter 8. Let's take a quick swing through those events leading up to Caesarea Philippi.

- Look first at 1:21-28. Here Jesus is shown to have authority over unclean or evil spirits. Note vs 27. Note also in vs 24 that the evil spirit knows who Jesus is, the Holy One of God – but the disciples don't know that yet.
- Then 1:32-34, Jesus has authority to heal sickness as well as casting out demons.
- Then 1:40-45, Jesus can cure even leprosy, a great scourge of the time, Jesus has the authority to cleanse lepers.
- Then 2:1-12, especially vs 5-7. Jesus claims authority to forgive sins, a huge blasphemy in the eyes of the Jewish scribes or teachers of the law. The picture is developing of just who Jesus must be.
- Then 2:23-28, noting verse 28 which pronounces that Jesus is "lord even of the Sabbath", Jesus can overturn or supersede long-held religious requirements written in the Jewish Law.
- Note then 3:11 where unclean spirits recognise Jesus as the Son of God.

- Jump then to 4:35-41. Here Jesus stills a storm at sea, and draws the question from the fearful disciples “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” The reader is obviously invited to draw his or her own conclusion.
- In chapter 5, at vs 7 another demon recognises Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. Then in 5:35-43 Jesus shows he has authority even over the power of death, with the raising from the dead of a young girl.
- In chapter 6 Jesus shows his authority again over nature, with the feeding of the 5000 and walking on the water. Still the disciples don’t get it, who Jesus is, instead in vs 50-51 they are terrified, afraid and astounded.
- In chapters 7 and 8 the authority and power of Jesus are again demonstrated, with healing of a Gentile woman, a deaf man, the feeding of the 4000 and a blind man cured. Only finally then, does Peter come to the realisation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

In today’s second reading, from the second last chapter of Mark, the sign put on Jesus’ cross reads “The King of the Jews”. But as he hangs there dying, someone else recognises Jesus as more than that, as the Son of God. None other than the Roman centurion, a person unschooled in Jewish faith and expectation. It confirms what Mark has claimed in 1:1. If the centurion can recognise who Jesus is, then surely we who have read and pondered the whole of Mark’s gospel, can recognise who Jesus is too. The gospel of Mark is a work of genius.

Friends, if I make it into eternal life, and if in eternal life we have the privilege of meeting those who’ve gone before us, very near the top of my bucket list will be Mark. I’d love to meet with Mark, and to do three things with him – first, to sit at the feet of a genius hugely important Christian, second to ask him a few questions such as did he know any of the Christmas stories , did his gospel really finish with the women discovering the empty tomb; and third, to express my vast appreciation for what he has given to us in the gospel of Mark – which is indeed “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.

To the glory of God. Amen.