

Introducing Jesus

Study 3: Mark's Picture of Jesus

- Q. Who is Jesus?
Who is Jesus for me?
Who is Jesus for me today?**

Introduction

You may be wondering why we're starting with Mark's Gospel rather than Matthew's, which comes before Mark in the New Testament. There are a number of reasons to do so. For one thing, Mark is the shortest of the four Biblical Gospels; for another it is now widely accepted that Mark's was the first to be written. But the best reason for starting with Mark is that Mark's Gospel is the most "gospely" gospel of them all!

Mark is the only writer who explicitly calls his writing a "gospel" (Mk 1:1), he tells us explicitly what the gospel was that Jesus himself proclaimed (Mk 1:14-15) and he was the first author to connect the notion of "good news" (*euangelion* / gospel) with a narrative of what Jesus himself had said and done. Prior to Mark authors like Paul (as we saw last week) understood "good news" as what God had accomplished through the death and the resurrection of the Messiah. In a sense then, Mark's book becomes the definition of what a "Gospel" is in literary terms.

As we noted in the first study, although Mark gives us some biographical information about Jesus, his task is not to inform us about the history of Jesus but rather to convince us as to who Jesus is and to challenge us to face the question: "Who is Jesus for me?"

As we are also about to see, Mark wrote his gospel to be read in cycles – the ending takes us back to the beginning. So we will study Mark by going through his book several times until, hopefully, we discover Jesus...

First Time Around: The Content.

Let's begin by reading Mark. It goes quickly because there are only 16 short chapters and the biggest part of that (Ch 11-16) is a retelling of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. Here is a basic outline of the content of Mark's Gospel:

The Prologue: 1:1 – 1:15

We are introduced to Jesus and His message

Selection and Conflict: 1:16-3:34

In this section Jesus calls disciples to follow him (1:16-20, 2:13-14, 3:13-19); Begins to demonstrate his power in healings and exorcism (1:21-28, 29-34, 40-45, 2:1-12); and

Faces his first rejection from opponents (2:1-12, 15-18, 3:1-6).

Teaching in Parables: 4:1-34

Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as a mystery that cannot be kept secret

Jesus begins to reveal himself to his disciples but do they get it? 4:35 – 8:26

Through a series of signs and teachings, Jesus shows his disciples that he has power over nature (4:35-41, 6:45-52), over evil spirits (5:1-20, 7:24-30), over illness (5:24-34, 6:53-56, 7:31-37), over the Law (7:1-23) and even death (5:21-23, 35-43). Even after all of this though, the Pharisees still ask him for a “sign from heaven” (7:11).

Not that the disciples are much better. They start this section asking, “Who is this?” (4:41) but continue in ignorance so that even at the end of this section Jesus has to ask them, “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21).

The disciples finally get it...or do they? 8:27 – 10:52

Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah) (8:29)

The disciples don’t “get” it. They think about the Messiah and his kingdom in terms of human power structures and earthly prestige (9:33-37, 10:35-45).

Jesus has to explain to them what “Messiah” means in his vocabulary, namely the one who must suffer and die (8:31-38, 9:30-32, 10:32-34).

The Beginning of the Passion: 11:1 – 13:37

Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1-11) and immediately comes into conflict with the authorities (11:15-19, 27-33, 12:1-44)

In response he gives dire apocalyptic warnings to Jerusalem (13:1-37)

The Passion: 14:1 – 15:47

Events move quickly now as Jesus is anointed for death (14:3-9), identifies himself with the Passover (14:12-25), is betrayed (14:43-50), tried (14:53-65), condemned (15:1-15), crucified (15:21-41) and buried (15:42-47).

The Empty Tomb: 16:1-8

In a rather strange and abrupt ending to the book, a group of women discover that Jesus’ body is missing from the tomb and they flee in fear.

(Note: Although the Bible adds two alternative longer endings to the book, this shorter ending is probably Mark’s original intended ending to the story and, as we will see, is a brilliant literary stroke.)

Second Time Around: Who is Jesus?

The question which Mark places before his readers is this: Who is Jesus?

From the beginning we know the answer because Mark tells us in the very first verse: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

“Christ” is not Jesus’ surname. It means “anointed One” and refers to the Jewish term “Messiah”. Mark is telling us that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures who will save God’s people and set them free. He adds that Jesus is the “Son of God”. This was not something Judaism expected so this is new information. Jesus the Messiah (Christ) is not just a human sent by God but is the very presence of Godself come to save Israel. This claim of Jesus’ divinity was blasphemous in Jewish law and would lead to Jesus’ condemnation (14:61-64).

This “news” about Jesus is repeated at several critical moments during the book:

At Jesus’ baptism God speaks from heaven, “You are my beloved Son” (1:11)

A demon-possessed man cries out, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (5:7)

At his Transfiguration a voice from heaven again declares “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (9:7)

At his trial before the Jewish Council, Jesus is asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” (14:61)

At his death a Roman centurion declares, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39).

While we, the readers, know this about Jesus, the characters in the book – especially the disciples – struggle to get it.

- After seeing his early miracles and being saved from a storm by him, they ask one another, “Who is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” (4:41). In the very next paragraph a demon-possessed man seems to know the answer (5:7)
- When Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter gets the answer half right, “You are the Christ.” (8:29) Immediately, a voice from heaven lets them know the full story (9:7).
- At his arrest the disciples desert Jesus (14:50) so that it is left to a Roman centurion to join the dots and declare that Jesus is the Son of God (15:39).

Through this clever device of literary irony (i.e. the reader knows what the characters don’t know) Mark causes us to wonder: Do we “get” that Jesus is the Son of God, or are we, like the disciples, still wondering, “Who is this man?”

Third Time Around: Do you see it yet?

The answer the disciples are able to reach in the book is that Jesus is the “Christ” or “Messiah” (8:29) however much of Jesus’ time in Mark’s gospel is spent trying to get the disciples to see a revised vision of what a “Messiah” could be. Showing Jesus wrestling with the disciples’ misconceptions is Mark’s way of wrestling us out of our misconceptions. Let’s begin with the ideas of power and kingdom.

The gospel Jesus preached was this: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” We noted already in the first study that the word “repent” here (*metanoia* in Greek) has little to do with confessing sins and being forgiven. Instead it means to change one’s way of thinking: to be transformed, as Paul puts it (Rom 12:2), by the renewing of one’s mind. For now though I want to focus on the word “kingdom”. *Basileia* in Greek is usually translated as “kingdom” but it has more to do with the authority of God’s reign than its geographical extent – suggested by the word “kingdom.” Too often we think of the Kingdom of God as a place (Heaven perhaps), whereas Jesus’ implication here was not that Heaven is coming close but rather that we are nearing a situation where God is in charge of things here and now. This was seditious, fighting talk in a world that was most definitely under the *basileia* of Caesar and Herod, his puppet.

Hearing such a message the first disciples could be forgiven for concluding that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah of whom Jewish tradition spoke who would raise an army and throw off the shackles of Roman oppression. Yet Jesus had a different vision of Messiahship – one where the Messiah as the suffering servant (Is 53) would overcome not only the oppressors but oppression itself by suffering and dying without resorting to violence in retaliation. Throughout the book Jesus tries to get them to see this.

Mark only relates two stories of Jesus restoring sight to the blind but he uses them to frame the period during which Jesus tries to open the disciples' eyes to the true meaning of Messiahship.

- After a series of miracles, including two in which Jesus produces bread for thousands, the disciples start worrying that they have no bread for their lunch. "Do you not yet *see* or understand?" asks Jesus (8:17). Do they not yet comprehend who Jesus is?
- Then Jesus heals the first of the two blind men (8:22-26). It is a healing that takes place gradually. At first the man only sees partially. Only after a second attempt by Jesus is his sight restored in full.
- Then we have Peter's confession: "You are the Christ" (8:29) but Peter only gets it in part because as soon as Jesus begins to speak about his death, Peter rebukes him (8:31-33).
- From this passage to 10:45 Jesus explains three times that he must suffer and die before being raised on the third day. All the while the disciples are still arguing about which of them will have positions of power in the coming kingdom (9:33-37, 10:35-45). Clearly, they don't "get" it yet.
- Finally, Jesus heals a second blind man (10:46-52). This time the sight is restored instantly and completely...
- and immediately Mark moves to the story of Jesus' Passion, where we see Jesus living out the role of the Messiah who suffers for the salvation of the world.

Fourth Time Around: Where will we meet this Jesus?

We first encounter Jesus in Galilee as he is heading out to be baptized by John in the Jordan (1:9). Then he returns to Galilee to begin proclaiming the gospel of God (1:14). Galilee is where he calls his disciples, performs his early miracles and spends the bulk of his ministry until he begins his journey to Jerusalem and his Passion. It is in Galilee that the disciples receive every opportunity to comprehend who Jesus is and what kind of Messiah he is.

On the eve of his arrest Jesus tells his disciples, rather cryptically, that after his resurrection he will "go before you to Galilee" (14:28).

The ending of Mark's gospel is very strange and unexpected, but it is the ending that gives us the clue that the book should be read in rounds.

Mark 16:1-8. Early on the first day of the week the women approach the tomb with spices to prepare Jesus' body for its final burial (on the Friday it was hastily bundled into the tomb because the Sabbath was approaching). There they discover the stone rolled away. The tomb is empty save for a young man who says to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." (16:6-7).

That's all fine and well for the disciples and Peter but where are we, Mark's readers, to meet Jesus so that we can get to know him? Well, "We first encounter Jesus in Galilee as he is heading out..."

Fifth Time Around: Who is Jesus for me?

Mark's appeal to his readers is deeply personal. Through the characters of the disciples, Mark invites us to confront and answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" We are given the same information as the disciples, witness the same miracles, hear the same teachings. Ultimately, I must decide: Will I repent and believe in the gospel?

At this most personal level, what is the transformation that belief in Jesus and his gospel offers me? The answer to this question is also deeply personal and will differ for each believer but Mark does give us the example of someone (identified by some commentators as Mark himself) whose personal transformation is paradigmatic of the type of transformation we can expect if we believe. The story begins in a foreign land...

In Mark 5 we meet the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus and the disciples have travelled across Lake Galilee to the foreign territory of the Decapolis. There they are met by a **man** who lived among the **tombs**. Beset by a legion of demons this man could not be bound but spent both **night and day** crying out and bruising himself with stones. In his encounter with Jesus the man is liberated from his affliction and afterwards when people come to see what happened they find him **seated** (he had been **running** to meet Jesus), **clothed** (had he been **naked** before?) and in his **right mind** – and they are **afraid**. Following this transformation we are told that he "went away and **began to proclaim** in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him" (5:20).

Compare that story to the story which unfolds towards the end of the book. At Jesus' arrest (14:51-52) there is a **young man** who had been following Jesus who is also seized. The young man shakes off his linen cloth and **runs** away **naked** into the **night**. Later, on the morning of the resurrection, the women encounter a young **man** at the **tomb**. Is it the same young man? We don't know since neither of them is named. This young man is **seated** on the **right side** and is **clothed** in a white robe. Seeing him, the women are **afraid**. Yet he is the first person to **proclaim** that Jesus is risen.

There is no indication that the same man is involved in both cases but the parallels between the stories are too many to be accidental. Mark is trying to tell us something. Am I afflicted by unclean spirits? Am I more dead than alive? Do I spend day and night running around in shame and disarray? Mark suggests that an encounter with the resurrected Jesus would help me find solid ground on which to sit, clothes to remove my shame, and put me back in my right mind. Is such a transformation frightening? Yes. But it would give me something to proclaim to the world about what Jesus had done for me.