

# Year of Saint Mark

The Church reads the Bible on Sundays in a three year cycle focusing on the Gospel of St. Matthew in Year A, St. Mark in Year B, and St. Luke in Year C. This is the Year of St. Mark which began with Advent. During the Sundays of Ordinary Time (that is, the Sundays outside the Advent/Christmas and Lenten/Easter seasons) our Gospel readings will systematically work through St. Mark's Gospel. I plan to introduce the Gospel tonight and post a self-study program on our website as I have during the last two years for the gospels of Luke and Matthew. The site is designed to provide the background information you need to read and understand the Gospel of Mark. You may access this information anytime you wish and work through it at your own pace. Study the Gospel of Mark during Lent, for example, as an alternative to giving something up.

Mark is the shortest gospel and is thought to be the first written. Using existing oral tradition, the gospel concentrates on the actions of Jesus: his teaching and healing actions in Galilee leading to opposition; his travel to and actions in Jerusalem leading to his arrest, trial, crucifixion and empty tomb. The gospels of Matthew and Luke follow Mark's story line while they both supplement it with other oral tradition consisting primarily of sayings of Jesus which serve to indicate the content of his teaching.

Mark is a dramatic account which should be read or heard read in one sitting. There is currently an off Broadway one-man presentation of the gospel, "\*mark," which does just that, featuring a somewhat seedy urban character breathlessly telling his story while alluding unknown pursuers. This modern retelling is suggestive of the origin of the gospel in Rome around 70 AD following the recent persecution of Christians by Nero.

Mark's gospel was meant to provide help and encouragement to those facing persecution. They were familiar with the promise of salvation offered by Jesus and the claims made about him as the Son of God and long awaited Messiah or Christ. They needed to be reminded of the hardships, difficulties and suffering faced by Jesus and that his followers did not understand the significance of Jesus in the midst of those difficulties. We might summarize the theological emphasis of Mark's gospel as what it means to be a disciple in the face of opposition. This is a point that is as important now as it was then.

The first verse of Mark's gospel reads: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Son of God)." Mark was not the first to use the word "gospel" (*evangelion* in Greek) meaning "the good news." Saint Paul had used it in his preaching and it became the label attached to the message of Christ. Mark was however the first to write a narrative which came to be called a "gospel." It is important to recognize what a gospel is and what it isn't. It is not a biography in the modern sense although it shares some of the features of ancient biographies. We can think of it as a story which explains the significance of Jesus. The four gospels that we have are all based on the historical events surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth but they are less concerned with the detailed accuracy and chronology of the reported events than they are about the meaning of those events. The gospels differ because their writers choose and arrange sayings and stories from the oral tradition in a way that is most meaningful to their times and the challenges faced by their

communities. The fact that we have four gospels makes it more likely that we will find help in addressing the challenges we face today.

The gospel of Mark is important because it is the most simple and basic presentation of the life of our savior. It addresses the question posed by Jesus in Mark 8:39: “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah or Christ, and “the Son of Man.” The meanings of those titles and the salvation Jesus offers is only realized by the disciples and the readers of the gospel in the context of the cross and resurrection.

Knowing Mark’s gospel gives us a better understanding of the gospels of Matthew and Luke which build on it. It also provides us with a concrete context with which to appreciate the more spiritual gospel of John. It is well worth taking time this year to become familiar with the gospel of St Mark.

S. Csontos, 10 February 2015.