

WHO IS THE KING?

St Mark's Gospel gives Jesus the titles 'Christ' and the 'Son of God' in the first line. This is dynamite. Imagine you knew of someone, let's call him Jack, who came from an ordinary background, trained as a mechanic, got into trouble with the authorities, and, let's say, died in police custody. Later, someone writes about him: 'This is the wonderful story of Jack, the Promised One, the Master of the Universe.' This only gives a rough idea of the claim being made in that first line of St Mark's Gospel.

What about Jesus in his public life? It's no surprise that he met all kinds of opinions about him as he went about preaching and healing. Though some called him a prophet, teacher or master, he liked to call himself the Son of Man. Peter recognised him as the Messiah (Christ) and a blind man called him the Son of David. Others thought him mad or in league with Satan. St Mark calls him the Son of God, and a Roman centurion, watching Jesus die, seems to agree. Who is the real Jesus?

Bad man?

Many in the religious authorities of Jesus' time distrusted Jesus. Perhaps they thought him a twister of genuine religious teaching. Some even accused him of working miracles by the power of Satan (cf. Mk 3:).

Mad man?

A number of Jesus' relatives wondered what had happened to the carpenter who now was touring the villages preaching, teaching and healing. They thought he'd gone mad and wanted to take him home to 'get him straight'. (cf. Mk 6:)

Good man?

Not everyone thought Jesus bad or mad. Quite a few saw him as good man, perhaps a prophet or a great teacher. (cf. Mk 8:, 12:) Even today, there are those who'll say that Jesus was a great leader, a courageous preacher, a friend of outcasts, and so on.

God-man?

This is the crunch. From the times of Jesus until now there has been a growing band of people who believe Jesus to be God-and-man (cf. Mk 1:1). This band of people is known as the Church; they're also called Christians. For them, Jesus is not just a good man who made a difference: he is the God-man who makes all the difference.

Is God-man a title used in St Mark's Gospel?

Not exactly. Jesus' favourite title for himself is **Son of Man**. Others give him titles that are *messianic* (about the Messiah), for example: **Son of God**, **Son of David**, **Messiah/Christ**, and **Saviour** (not in St Mark's Gospel as such, although the name 'Jesus' means something like 'God saves').

- Titles starting with 'Son of ...' naturally mean that you take after and carry the essence of your parent within you. For example, 'Son of Man' is a Jewish way of saying 'ordinary bloke' – just a man.
- In St Mark's Gospel, Jesus often calls himself Son of Man. He never calls himself Christ or Son of God. The reasons for this will hopefully become obvious as we discuss the titles individually.

SON OF GOD

St Mark writes it in his first line; twice a mysterious heavenly voice proclaims it; even a Roman officer was moved to declare it. In churches and cathedrals all over the world it is constantly proclaimed right up to this day. And yet in the Gospel, Jesus never says it of himself. He answered to it once on the night before death. It is the title 'Son of God'.

Introduction

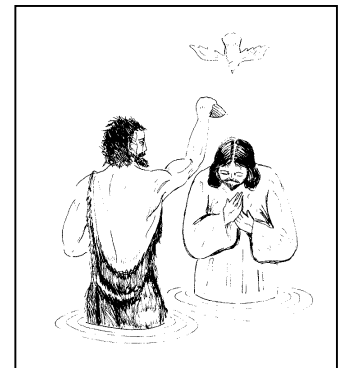
'This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' (1:1)

Mark includes the title in his opening line, as if to grab the attention of his audience from the start. It is difficult to imagine a more attention-grabbing first line – especially if you're a persecuted Christian wondering whether to keep faith in Jesus.

Baptism 1:9-11

'You are my own dear Son I am pleased with you.' (1: 11)

On the verge of his public life, Jesus presents himself to John for baptism in the Jordan. John's baptism was a sign to repent and make ready for the Messiah. Why did Jesus ask for it? Though sinless, did he wish to be taken for a sinner? Was it to set an example to others? Or maybe it was a sign of a new direction in his life, from the quiet, settled life of Nazareth to the public life on the road preaching and healing.



Notice the symbols of the Trinity (Three-in-One-God): voice (sign of Father), Jesus (Son), dove (sign of Spirit).

Transfiguration 9:2-8

'This is my own dear Son - listen to him' (9:7)

This seems a sneak preview of the resurrection. At any rate, the disciples are to keep it secret until after then. The inner circle (Peter, James and John) are dazzled by a glimpse of Jesus' glory. Perhaps it is to strengthen their faith before his approaching suffering and death.



For the disciples, there are very strong symbols of the divine: the mountain as a place of encounter with God; the dazzling brilliance of God's glory; a cloud as a veil for that glory; the mysterious voice and the presence of the two great figures from Hebrew scripture. No wonder the disciples are afraid and cover their faces.

Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets) appear either side of Jesus. Jesus is presented as fulfilling the law and the prophets. Jesus, as the Son of God, eclipses these other two figures in importance; that is why the voice says: *listen to him*.

For Christians today

Son of God is a **messianic** title. It means that one has come from God and is God's presence on earth. Not a title the Jews would chuck at anyone. It belongs only to the long-promised Messiah who would establish God's reign in justice and peace and would defeat evil.

So for Christians today, to call Jesus the Son of God means accepting that Jesus is the Messiah, God's promised one. The title *Son of God* means that Jesus is sent by the Father, possesses the Holy Spirit, and so presents the true face of God to humanity. Christians today find the title very helpful as it explains their understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God as Father and Son.

For Christians, Jesus is not just a great prophet or leader, like Elijah or Moses. '**Listen to him**' gets across that Jesus is the greater goal or focus of all the teaching and prophecy in Hebrew Scriptures. He is the fulfilment of these scriptures.

Baptism

Baptism comes from the Greek for 'plunging'. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, the plunging in the Jordan symbolising the washing away of sin and preparing for the Messiah. The person goes into the water and comes out cleansed, ready to start again.

Christian baptism has a more radical meaning: the person comes out of the water a new and different person. John identified the difference: '*I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with Holy Spirit.*' (1:8). Christians believe that Jesus offers to all by baptism the same relationship he has with the Father: we can become sons and daughters of God.

From the earliest days, baptism was the way that Christians welcomed new members into their community. Some Christians (for example, Roman Catholics) have a practice of baptising babies. Water is poured three times on the head of the child. The parents and the community undertake to teach the child about God throughout childhood.

Other Christian groups (for example, Baptists) believe that a child cannot make such a decision. They think it is better that a person decides for himself or herself about baptism when they are older. The ceremony of baptism is also different. Known as 'Believer's Baptism' the person is fully immersed in a pool of water in the same way that Jesus was fully immersed in the River Jordan.

Did you know ...?

At special times Jesus took an 'inner circle' of three disciples to accompany him. These are Peter, James and John. For example, they are with him when he heals the daughter of Jairus, at the Transfiguration, and in the Garden of Gethsemane. It seems as though Jesus wished these three to be especially faithful and an example to his other followers.



Activities

1 Some of the statements below are false. Rewrite them so as to make them true.

- i) 'Son of God' was the most common title Jesus gave himself in St Mark's Gospel.
- ii) Baptism comes from a Greek word for 'plunging'.
- iii) In the account of Jesus' baptism the dove is a symbol of peace.
- iv) It was shortly before he died when Jesus was baptised by John.
- v) The Baptism of John the Baptist has the same meaning as the Baptism in Christianity.
- vi) All Christians believe that it's best to baptise infants into the Church rather than wait.
- vii) The baptism of older people or adults is sometimes known as 'believer's baptism'.
- viii) In St Mark's Gospel there are two incidents when a heavenly voice speaks.

2 Read the account of the Transfiguration as though witnessed by an onlooker.

- a) Who were the 'inner circle' of Jesus' disciples?
- b) Why might Jesus have wished them to see him transfigured?
- c) Write down **four** things in the story that symbolise the presence of the divine.
- d) Which Old Testament figures appeared either side of Jesus?
- e) What do Christians believe the presence of these two figures says about Jesus?

They crossed the slope below here and then began to climb again... They stopped and Jesus lifted his hand as though to say 'stay', and he walked up another ten yards or so. No speech; in fact, no sound, nothing. No birdsong, no wind, no tree noise, nothing. Then he began to glow. There is no other word. It was as though he grew white-hot. All colour went; he was pure white, the purest white, from head to toe. It hurt the eyes and I turned away. The three men, nearer to the brightness, had dropped, face down.

In the shade of the hut, behind eyelids closed and smarting, I still saw the white figure. I turned again and opened my eyes. Now there were two more incandescent figures. One of great age and bearded, the other lean, in a coarse robe, leather-girdled. The three were speaking together... With eyes nearly shut, I could just tolerate the brilliance of the light. Peter and the brothers lay still.

Peter raised his head first. In a second, he was on his feet, his voice thundering up the hillside. 'Moses!' he shouted, 'Elijah!' His voice was wild, hysterical, out of control. He shouted, out of wonder, in joy. I felt afraid. Then the glow began to fade and the whole mountainside went into the shadow of a great cloud. I dropped to my knees and hid my head in my arms. Peter's voice died away and a voice a hundred times louder rang round the valley. 'This is my Son,' it said, 'my chosen. Listen to him!'

3 'All Christians should accept the practice of infant baptism.' Do you agree? Show that you have considered more than one point of view.

For ...

Christ died for all people, young and old

baptism removes the stain of Original Sin and plants God's life in the child

parents can't avoid making crucial choices for their children; *not* to baptise an infant is in itself a choice made by the parents for the infant

a person can choose to live by or reject Christianity when they're older

in the early Church whole households were baptised into the Church, including infants

Against ...

in the early Church most were baptised when they were older

why should people be forced into a religion? God respects human freedom

often, baptising babies is just the done thing; getting baptised when you're older shows real commitment

many infants baptised as Christians won't have any upbringing in Christian ways