

ST MARK'S GOSPEL

Who was St Mark?

A Second Century Bishop named Papias wrote that 'Mark had been the interpreter of Peter, and wrote down accurately all that had been said and done by the Lord'. Another early Bishop called Irenaeus wrote 'Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing the things preached by Peter.'

A man called John Mark is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles; he was the cousin of Barnabas. He accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys. If this John Mark is one and the same as Mark the Evangelist, then we know Mark's mother had a house in Jerusalem, a house used by early Christians for meetings. It must be remembered that *Marcus* was a common name throughout the Roman Empire, and this adds to the haze surrounding the identity of Mark the evangelist.

When did he write?

Present scholars guess that he wrote sometime between 60-70 AD in Rome. Christians were being persecuted there. Rome had suffered a serious fire in 64 AD and the emperor Nero, it is thought, blamed Christians. Christians made an easy scapegoat (easy group to blame). They were often from the lower classes. Their household meetings and worship might have made pagan Romans suspicious.

They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire – so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle ... Tacitus, Annals 15:44

If the River Tiber reaches the walls, if the River Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!' Tertullian, a Christian writer

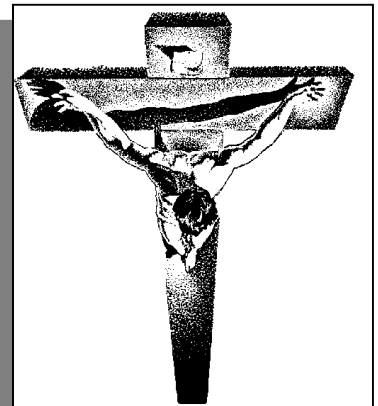
What is his message?

Jesus is the Messiah -the longed for, promised servant-king who would defeat evil and establish God's reign of justice and peace on earth. Jesus was not the popular idea of a Messiah the people of Palestine (including Simon Peter cf. 8:32) seemed to have had.

The Kingdom of God is set up on earth in and through Jesus. Mark includes many more miracle accounts than parables in his Gospel. Miracles show more vividly God's power breaking out on the earth against the reign of evil.

Your suffering has meaning.

It is difficult to bear suffering. If suffering has meaning, then it is more bearable. By concentrating on the example of Christ, Mark wants the early Christians in Rome to reflect on their own pain. For example, almost a third of his Gospel is concerned with rejection, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.



About a third of Mark's Gospel is devoted to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

In effect, Mark's Gospel tells the early Christians:
Jesus suffered – so will you if you follow him.
Jesus conquered death and evil – so will you if you follow him.

Anything particular about St Mark's style?

Mark didn't come top in Greek class. Perhaps he thought in Aramaic and tried to put it across in Greek. Still, his Gospel contains lively touches, suggesting eyewitness evidence. There is, for example, a mention of a 'cushion' in the calming of the storm (4:38) and of 'green grass' in the feeding of the 5000 (6:39).

The Gospel is not written for Jewish readers. Not one for wasting words, Mark still takes time to explain Jewish customs and Aramaic expressions throughout the Gospel. For example, he translates the word 'Golgotha' (15:22) and 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani' (15:34).

Mark also presents a very human figure of Jesus. For example, Jesus feels sorry for a leper (1:41); he has pity on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd (6:34); he is angry when the disciples try to stop the little children approaching him (10:14); he is moved to love the honesty of the rich young man (10:21); he is greatly distressed in the Garden of Gethsemane, crying out 'Abba' - 'Daddy' (14:33).

Why do Christians today take St Mark's Gospel seriously?

The Gospel is inspired, Christians will say. They don't mean that it was incredibly well written; they simply mean that Mark received inspiration from the Holy Spirit to write what he did. This gives St Mark's Gospel status as part of the written Word of God – the Bible. Christians believe that God's Word is alive and active, a Word that speaks to all peoples of every time.



What do Christians mean when they say Mark's Gospel is the Word of God?

They might mean the gospel has power to influence lives, even to change lives completely. Christians believe that they can base their lives on the gospel; they can be confident that it contains the message of salvation for them in their own time. Although Mark wrote his Gospel for a people and a time, the themes of discipleship, service, suffering, and so on, continue to be relevant for all Christians today.

Some Christians, for example, Christian evangelicals, believe that the Bible is the *only* guide to Christian living. As far as they're concerned, 'The Bible and the Bible alone' is God's Word. Other Christians, for example, Roman Catholics, see God's Word coming through both the Bible and through the teaching tradition of the Church.

How should Christians interpret the gospels?

A is for authority. You interpret scripture on the basis of some authority. The simplest authority is your own authority. You use your own authority to understand most things you read. You're using your own authority to understand this sentence. In reading the gospels, you've had to trust the authority of many others who've translated them for you.

B is for belief. If you are not a believing Christian, your attitude to the scriptures will be different from that of believing Christians. What for you may be 'dead letters' are for them 'living words'. Christians believe that the Spirit that inspired the words is the same

Spirit that breathes through the Church. Many believe that the Church has a **divine authority** to interpret scripture.

C is for context. When you tried to understand the meaning of the Gospel passages, the wisest thing to do is to look up the passages from which they are taken, so that you know what came before and after. In other words, you read the excerpts in their proper context. If you read excerpts out of context, you're bound to get misunderstandings.

D is for differences. Different Christian traditions sometimes come to different conclusions about the meaning of certain parts of scripture.



Interpreting a line of St Mark's Gospel...

Did you know...?

As far as we know, Jesus left no writings behind. Could he read and write? Most certainly. He read from the Hebrew Scriptures in synagogue. In one famous incident, he wrote in the sand. But still he commissioned his Apostles to go out and teach rather than go out and write.

Did you know...?

Memories were well trained in the people of first century Palestine. For example, students would take pride in remembering whole sections of Hebrew scripture word perfect.

Parchment (an ancient form of paper) was scarce – and expensive. Instead, records and incidents were often stored in heads. People used their trained memories to pass on their stories carefully.

Activities

- 1 Choose any **three** of the passages A to I beside all from St Mark's Gospel.
 - a) Try in your own words to get across what each passage means. Write your answers in one sentence each.
 - b) Now look to the notes below about your chosen passages.
 - c) What changes would you now make to your answers in (a)?

- A 'Repent, and believe the Good News.' (1:15)
- B '... nobody puts new wine into old wineskins ...' (2:22)
- C '... let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness: he is guilty of an eternal sin.' (3:29)
- D 'Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean ...' (7:15)
- E '... anyone who wants to save his life will lose it ...' (8:35)
- F 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.' (10:26)
- G 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink ...?' (10:38)
- H 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what belongs to God.' (12:17)
- I 'Take it,' he said 'this is my body' (14:22)

- 2 Evaluate the following statement. Show that you have considered more than one point of view.

St Mark's Gospel is a reliable record of Jesus' public life.

For the statement

the oral tradition was quite dependable; Mark would have had access to eyewitness accounts

Mark was concerned with the truth; he could have left certain aspects of Jesus' ministry out so as to make the overall account more appealing, but this he refused to do

other evangelists seemed to borrow much from Mark

The Church accepted St Mark's Gospel as authentic

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Against the statement

Mark wanted to strike a chord with the early Christians and so has highlighted certain things at the expense of other things

No gospel names Mark as among the close followers of Jesus

Mark's account does not agree with Luke's account over how the crucified criminals treated Jesus

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Answers to Q1

A Repent means complete U-turn from sin to God. Repent does not mean a shallow 'sorry'.

B New wine ferments, produces gas and so needs a container that will stretch (new wineskins). Old wineskins are already pre-stretched, and so will burst if forced to stretch more.

C A very difficult saying. Basically, if you call the Holy Spirit, the source of life, healing and forgiveness, evil and harmful, then how will you ever be healed from sin? It's a little like a person dying of thirst who thinks pure water is poison.

D Jesus erased the distinction between 'clean foods' and 'unclean foods'.

E An example of Jesus' vivid style of preaching. To give up your life is to live for God and others in service and sacrifice (maybe even the sacrifice of your earthly life). To 'save your life' is to live for yourself - ultimately futile.

F Again, Jesus' vivid style. A camel was the largest animal around, the eye of a needle the smallest gap. Some people think 'the eye of a needle' meant a gate into Jerusalem, a narrow gate that would require a camel to go onto its knees in order to enter. Others reject this. The 'eye of a needle' means exactly that, they say.

G The 'cup' is a symbol of the suffering that lay ahead.

H Jesus was asked about paying taxes to the Emperor (Caesar). His answer seems to be that you should meet the state's (fair) requirements whilst attending to the higher demands of God.

I The majority of Christians (Roman Catholics, Russian and Greek Orthodox) believe that these words should be taken literally. What was bread becomes Christ's body, what was wine his blood. Other Christians believe in a symbolic meaning, seeing bread as representing Christ 'broken for others'.