

Advent 1 Year B 2008

This is the Day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. And so... prepare ye the way of the Lord.

AMEN

Happy New Church Year! Happy blue-for-Mary instead of green-for-the-long-season-of Trinity/Pentecost! Happy New Lectionary Year B —that's the what (Mark) year. There are 4 obvious homilettes for today. First, I could combine each of three individual topics rolled into one homily, with each of the three parts skimmed over and balanced in a skilled and equal way; Nah! Keep awake!

A second choice would be an introduction to Advent, a season of preparation and waiting, with some appropriate introspection to figure out what it would take to be ready to greet the Christ child on Christmas, rather than emphasizing repentance— a season of expectation and readiness: Nah. Keep awake!

The third choice would be my usual rip through a variety of ways of reading the Gospel, which I believe is the principle charge for any homily— something about the apocalyptic vision of end times, the lesson of the fig tree, and the warning to the workers in the household to be ready for the unexpected return of the householder. Nah. Keep awake!

So the 4th choice is an introduction to the Gospel we'll read for this year B and a challenge for each of us to do before the 4th Sunday of Advent. What are the known facts of Mark, its author, its intended audience, and any other factoids? Why is Mark important? What are the features of this Gospel? What makes it remarkable, since it's so much shorter, and less detailed than either Matthew or Luke? Is there anything

particular to notice about the jerky short direct style of this Gospel? What else might we think of in the Mark year and why have I chosen this choice #4 rather than 1-3?

Here's what people currently believe about Mark's Gospel. It was the first written Gospel, using or inventing the word Gospel, written around 70 AD. There seem to be some "Latinisms," phrases shaped in a way typical for Latin hearers, so the theory guesses that it was either written in Rome or Latin-speaking community of Alexandria. Another tradition suggests that Mark is from the tradition of Peter, and is a written form of the oral tradition around Peter. Its history is as a written document whether or not Mark was the person who actually wrote it. Other than these wisps of tradition, virtually nothing is known about the author of Mark's Gospel.

Why then is this Gospel so important in the history of Christianity? Mark told a narrative story about Jesus, calling it a Gospel. Whether a Gospel is the content of the work or a name for this sort of biographical narrative is merged in Mark's new word. The story develops from the early ministry of Jesus and travels through the main points of his life and culminates in his death. We know that Matthew and Luke used Mark, as a source in their works and it's also probable that even John knew something of the Markan tradition. It is really Mark then who set the stage for all the later Christian gospel writings.

Mark's Gospel tells the story of Jesus, describing the various miracles and remarkable actions that Jesus performed while leading up to the death of Jesus. It's often referred to as a long introduction to the story of the death of Jesus. Mark paints Jesus as mysterious and who intentionally keeps people from knowing who he is. Jesus tells people not to tell anyone

about his miracles. He takes the disciples away, to teach them in private, so that others won't hear or understand the message. He appears to be very secretive in Mark's gospel. Mark seems to tell his story of secrecy and misunderstanding to reconceptualize the story of Jesus. There was apparently something about the previous, earlier understandings of Jesus, even within the Christian community, that Mark feels compelled to correct in his writing, to give a new meaning for what was probably a post-war, after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem experience. Why had it all happened? What had gone wrong? Why was Jerusalem destroyed? Mark constructs his account to make sense out of the death of Jesus in light of what did happen to Jerusalem.

Mark reflects on the destruction of the Temple as part of his understanding of the significance of the life and death of Jesus and so connects these two stories. By interweaving these stories, Mark makes the rejection of Jesus and the death of Jesus central to the story that results in the destruction of the Temple, which hadn't happened at the time of Jesus, but had by the time Mark wrote. Mark shapes the narrative to show that as Jesus stood up against the Temple, and so that's a significant reason to show why he must die and Jerusalem must be destroyed.

Mark uses the early oral sources of Jesus' miracle stories and that seems to suggest that the community first understood Jesus as just a simple miracle worker, but miracle workers were a pretty common type in that world, even Jewish miracle workers. Mark makes the point that Jesus isn't just a miracle worker; he's way more. Not all of the miracles go in the usual way, so that makes Jesus a peculiar miracle worker and that's one of Mark's concerns. He is trying to show what it means that Jesus is Messiah. It's what the disciples didn't get, but we

as readers must understand, that being Messiah means going to death. People understand the wonderful teachings and the miracles, but it's harder to understand them as a pathway to death. Mark uses the motif of misunderstanding, of secrecy to reinterpret the understanding of Jesus after the fall of Jerusalem.

We also read about Mark's Messianic Secret. Harvard's Helmut Koester explains that phrase this way. "It seems to me that the messianic secret is, indeed, that the true messiahship of Jesus cannot be recognized in his miracles. The disciples as they witness the miracles don't understand. They don't know what is going on. They are taught to understand from the prediction of the passion onwards who Jesus is. And that the messianic secret of Jesus is that he is the son of man who has come to suffer and not the Messiah who is going to do great miracles. And that will become clear only at the very end of the story of Jesus. And it is only the story of the suffering and the death of Jesus reveals that the secret of Jesus, and reveals who Jesus really is."

That's the short course on understanding some of what the Mark gospel is out to show. More artistic points can be made. Although Mark's style is short, blunt, with clear nouns, and seemingly simple structure in the narratives, think of some of the marked stylistic elegances. In the mentioned story about the destruction of the Temple, two stories are blended until in understanding each, a connection and direction. Similarly think of the healing of Jairus's daughter, which is interrupted by the woman with the flow touching his hem and being cured, and then finishing the healing of the girl. Touching the untouchable and touching the young woman show Jesus to be beyond the range of simple rules, but is called by a higher law to be a healer of all. While the two stories are quite

distinct and whole on their own, clearly Mark has blended them for dramatic effect, but also for theological and soteriological weight. The Savior has authority and right to cure any sick person, however unclean the sick person might seem. Mark's skill is all the more impressive in that he was inventing a form and using simple language.

Here's the reason I'm so taken with pausing to talk about Mark's gospel. I'm a big fan of the novels and writing of Reynolds Price. He's a man of deep faith, and as it turns out, is an Episcopalian. He's a considerable linguist as well, and wrote a fine, fine book called *Three Gospels*. He makes his own translation of Mark and John and attempts to reconcile the four gospels in a newly created combined gospel. His introduction to Mark's gospel says:

“Mark can be read through in less than an hour; and whether you read its original Greek or a later translation, you will quickly scent its pawky roughness of language and movement—*Jesus came here and did this; then at once he turned elsewhere and did that*. It reels out its jerky, very peculiar story at full-tilt speed and with what seem the first words at hand—a small and modest vocabulary. Yet Mark's words, in their energy and efficiency, have proved surprisingly ready through the past two thousand years to spring into vivid action in a watchful reader's mind. And the images of that action have proved be literally seismic in the history of the world.

“As if more than half aware of that power, Mark feels no need to explain its characters' motives or aims—its few explanations concern Jewish law and custom of the first century AD— and it flatly declines to clarify the terms of its own discourse for any reader who has not previously learned a good deal about Jesus and the world of his time. What, for instance, does Mark mean by the *reign of God* or *the Son of Man*

or the one word *Abba?* etc...And among dozens of other unexplored mysteries—even more crucially, for most of its length— Mark the writer will tell us no more of the mind and nature of his central figure than a modern cub reporter of average intelligence might deduce on a two-day visit to the hectic periphery of a briefly magnetic and momentarily popular preacher-magician with a gift for healing the psychically afflicted.

“With all those refusals to satisfy the curiosity of any but the previously prepared reader, however, the pamphlet which is commonly called the Gospel of Mark is generally thought to be the first-written of the four canonical or church-approved gospels. As such—despite centuries of neglect when it was thought to be a mere summary of the longer and fuller Matthew and Luke— Mark has proved the most influential of human books. All other books from four thousand years of epics, plays, lyrics, and biographies have touched human life less potently.

“Mark has weighed that heavily on its immediate gospel successors and thus on subsequent Western literature, on a good deal of Eastern literature, and on the art and worship of countless millions...”

Whether for effect, for content, for style, for shortness—or efficiency, in Price’s word— Mark, again quoting Price “is the most original narrative writer in history, an apparently effortless sovereign of all the skills and arts of durably convincing storytelling. He is, above all, the first great master of ideal narrative distance—he stands his reader in the ideal position before his subject: the reader sees precisely enough at any moment to induce in him or her a further hunger to see more; and to the very end, that hunger is never surfeited, perhaps never sated.”

Keep awake for a challenge. I challenge us each to read through, at one sitting—on a quiet afternoon or an early morning jumpstart or at some other scheduled hour-plus — the whole gospel of Mark. Let it be a way to prepare for this Year B, let it be a way to start Advent, but even more let this reading—and read it from a readable accurate version, perhaps, the Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version or Reynolds Price’s fine translation—be an invitation to meet again, to be reintroduced to the central figure of the gospel, of the gospels, of Christianity, reintroduced to the one who came to love, and lead, and save us each and all, Jesus the Christ. Keep awake because he has come; he has saved; and he does come again to renew his promises of life eternal to each and all of us: Good News.

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