

An Introduction to the Gospels and the Gospel of S. Mark

This evening, and for the next three Sunday evenings, we'll be thinking about reading or rereading the Gospels. We'll introduce questions and themes that we encounter when reading the Gospels which will help us to listen to what God is saying to each of us through Scripture.

We may have read each Gospel by ourselves many times, or we may never have thought of reading the Gospels outside of the passages that are given to us day by day in the course of Mass. However familiar we are with them it always pays to go back to the Gospels again and again, as through them especially God speaks to us as his Church. The special place of the Gospels is reflected in our liturgy during Mass, as the proclamation of the Gospel serves as the high point of the liturgy of the Word through which Christ himself speaks to all who are gathered.

Gospel means 'good news'. It's from the Old English translation of the Greek '*euangelion*', 'good news', from which we get our word 'evangelist' or 'evangelical'. The most obvious question to ask when we begin to think about the Holy Gospels is why do we have four? Why have these four books which tell us about the good news of the life and death of our Lord? Why have four books which, at face value, have all the inconsistencies and contradictions of four different accounts of the same story. This is a question which has been raised by the Church from almost as soon as the four Gospels became established as Scripture. S. Irenaeus, writing at the end of the 2nd century, is aware of this question. He writes:

The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men. (*Against Heresies*, 3.11)

The question of why there are four Gospels is still asked by scholars. However, strictly speaking, the world has known many more gospels than our four. A great deal of excitement is still generated by some modern critics of Christianity with each 'discovery' of secret or hidden gospels, but these were not unknown to the early Church. In the second and third centuries, a number of texts circulated under the label 'gospel', which in almost every case seem later, derived from or supplementary to the accounts we find in the Four Gospels favoured by the Church. In other cases, such as the enigmatic Gospel of Thomas, these so-called gospels seem to reflect the influence of another body of thought or are made up of a collection of sayings and thoughts which bear little similarity to the kinds of text which we have in the Gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The inclusion of four Gospels in our New Testament gets only stranger when we realise that almost all of the Gospel of S. Mark is included in the Gospels of SS. Matthew and Luke. For this reason, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the 'Synoptic' Gospels. This is from the Greek, '*sunopsis*', meaning 'viewed together'. There's an obvious literary relationship between the Gospels of SS. Mark, Matthew, and Luke. We can't explore this relationship here, and it remains a matter of scholarly dispute. However, most scholars are agreed that Mark was completed first in around 70AD. Around or shortly after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. S. Mark's Gospel, it seems, was then used as the basis of the Gospels of SS. Matthew and Luke.

That's about as much as we can say by way of introduction to the Gospels here. To turn briefly to the Gospel of S. Mark, we can make a few points to begin our thinking about S. Mark's Gospel, and what it has to say to us. As the shortest of the Gospels, at only 16 chapters, it can be comfortably read in its entirety in one or two sittings.

S. Mark's entire gospel is shot through with a sense of urgency. The phrase 'and immediately' is used nine times. St. Mark's narrative is constructed to convey this sense. "This happened, and then this happened, and then this happened.". This give both a sense of importance about the events which S. Mark is describing, but also, when you read his gospel you get the sense of somebody telling you

about something that they simply cannot wait to tell you. Something remarkable has happened and you need to know!

The gospel also begins in this vein. We don't find any account of the birth of Jesus. Rather, S. Mark begins his Gospel at the start of Jesus' ministry as an adult. S. John the Baptist is in the wilderness, and Jesus, without introduction, comes from Nazareth and is baptised – an event we have celebrated today¹. And so the rest of the story follows.

Lots of what we will say about the content of S. Mark's Gospel will be repeated as we consider the content of SS. Matthew and Luke. Here we note that one chapter – chapter 13 – the so-called 'Little Apocalypse' of S. Mark seems out of joint with the rest of the Gospel. In this chapter, Jesus goes to the Temple Mount and prophesies the events around the destruction of the Temple. This chapter gives us our best clue of dating the Gospel, based on the actual destruction of the Temple in 70AD.

A striking feature of S. Mark's Gospel is its end. Thoughts about the end of his gospel will be where we end this talk tonight. If you pick up various bibles you'll see various endings of S. Mark's gospel are given. In chapter 16, the women that had followed Jesus go to the tomb to anoint his body, and are told by a young man in white that he is risen. These women are terrified, run away, and say nothing to anyone. Some end here at chapter 16 verse 8, some continue with a shorter ending that claims the women briefly told what had happened to S. Peter, and some continue to verse 20. This longer ending gives us a fuller account, with Resurrection appearances and an account of the Ascension but seem later and to draw on both the Gospels of SS. Luke and John.

Both these shorter and longer endings past verse 8 reflect the different manuscripts of the Gospel. Most scholars are agreed that the last two options were not the ending S. Mark intended – or certainly, they are not the earliest complete ending of the text. They are not found in the earliest manuscripts. Both these ending seek to explain how it is that S. Mark could have ended his Gospel at verse 8 with the women saying nothing to anyone. Some people draw from this that we should ignore these passages, the shorter ending and verses 9 – 20, but we must recognise that they, especially the longer ending, have been

¹ This address was given originally on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

considered as Scripture by the Church at various times.

But what if S. Mark's Gospel did end at 16.8, with the women running away in fear, and saying nothing to anyone. For our own faith, as Christians, we know the rest of the story – the Resurrection appearances, and the story of the early Church, through the other Gospels, the book of Acts and the Epistles of S Paul. By ending where he does, S. Mark reminds us of God's power in overcoming human frailty and disbelief, especially our own. The silence of the women is not the end of the story.

We can leave with two thoughts this evening raised by this look at the Gospels, and the Gospel of Mark, for our own lives. The fact that we have not one, but four Gospels reminds us of the inexhaustible depths of God's wisdom. Our God cannot be contained in any one book, or series of books. We Christians are people who believe God became flesh, as we have recently celebrated (at Christmas), became a person. We believe in God who cannot be fully described or contained by any set of words. Each of the Gospels points toward the mystery of the God we will one day see face to face, whilst reminding us that the depths of that mystery are inexhaustible. God always has more say to us. The Four Gospels remind us of, and draw us into, the mystery of God.

The second lesson we can learn from S. Mark to apply in our own lives today is the urgency with which he writes his Gospel. S. Mark's encounter with the Lord, and his own Faith, gives an importance and an urgency to the message which he wanted to share. In our own lives, where we come to learn something of importance we too must share it. S. Mark gives us the confidence to share our own Faith with the same urgency and immediacy he displays in his gospel. We, like S. Mark, have encountered the Good News of God. We too must share it.

May S. Mark and all of the Evangelists pray for us now and always.
Amen².

² An address given by Fr Simon Cuff during Evensong and Benediction on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord 2014.