

Sermon Notes for St. Mark

“*And he gave some to be . . . evangelists*” (epistle)

The Church has always given the name Mark to the gospel writer. This is a very common name of the period, so I do not advise assuming he must be one of the Marks mentioned in the New Testament. Early tradition links the writer with Peter (and Paul), but I do not see evidence of this in what he wrote. So what do we know of Mark? He is a first century Christian. He writes before the destruction of the Temple. He writes a fairly crude Greek with a good deal of Aramaic phrasing (and some words) which one might expect either because he had access to early tradition or because he was an Eastern Jew. He also uses some Latin words – Herod's army includes a “speculator”.

He (just) affirms the Gentile mission, in the sense that he gives us the miracle for the Syro-Phoenician woman. By the standards of the later evangelists, this is minimal. But it is enough – and we do not know how much more material was available to him. If he had been in Rome with Peter and Paul, surely he would have known and used more, as the issue would have been so important.

I have assumed he is the first Gospel writer. Why? Suppose Matthew was first, as some tradition says. Then Mark knew Matthew (for so much is in similar words and similar order) but suppressed the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, indeed most of the sayings, the Birth and the Resurrection appearances. Is this credible? And clearly he does not *just* know Matthew, for he has information of his own, like Alexander and Rufus (whose father was Simon of Cyrene). And I do not believe in the sub-literary process which often changes Matthew's clear and sharp narrative (in tolerable Greek) into a garrulous, badly-ordered narrative (in worse Greek). The reverse process is overwhelmingly more likely. If Mark is first, then he invented the very concept of a gospel. For it is not the same as a biography (and these were only just beginning to be invented in the pagan world). It is a narrow focus on saving truth. Maybe the idea came from the Elijah story in Kings – which also begins without any birth story and ends abruptly so far as Elijah is concerned (for he is not dead but taken up to heaven).

We should not ignore mechanical constraints. Mark (like all the evangelists) is writing before the invention of the book. There is a sensible upper limit to what will fit on a roll, and two-roll documents are almost unheard of. Besides, the more content, the higher the cost of copies. He was bound to limit himself if he was to be of service to the Church (which may still include a Jewish audience); we do not know how much more material did not make the final cut.

Concept and content are very different. If Mark invented the concept, I doubt he did more than *select* content. Some try to understand him not least by considering what he *might* have known (because the other evangelists found it) but did not use. This is of course unsafe. Could he *not* have known the Lord's Prayer? Well, there is no evidence Paul knew it! Perhaps Mark had a very strict concept of relevance which is not ours (as it was not Matthew's or Luke's). We will never understand Mark by trying to make him answer *our* questions.

We do much better if we study what Mark *did* write, particularly when least likely to be simply reproducing his sources. The gospel begins (though the text is not certain) and climaxes with Jesus as the “Son of God”. But within it, a frequent topic is the attempt to *conceal* that status, obvious to devils and guessed by some who are healed. Possibly related to it is the way Jesus (mainly) uses the term “Son of Man”, generally and perhaps always of himself. And one imagines that Peter's confession of the Anointed at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 9:21) is designedly placed fairly central, and closely followed by the Transfiguration. Mark does not define his terms other than by this placement, but his design is to demonstrate a unique relationship to the Father – and that the foreseeable consequence of that relationship was a predicted death. John makes similar points, though in a different way. We do not know whether John had read Mark, but the theological agreement matters. These are the Gospel truths.

This has deliberately been an academic analysis. I do believe that such analysis is a necessary adjunct of the faith. Not that it can create faith; but it helps us to appreciate the nature of an evidence-based faith. Scholarship is not prayer; but it can be a spiritual discipline in its own right. If we could not recover the faith and experience of some early Christians, we would still know the developed Church, but not its foundations. That would be disturbing. But it is not so.