

MARK - OVERVIEW & DISCIPLESHIP - 7/1/18

When you see a painting, you probably step back and look at the whole of it before zooming in on a certain section that might intrigue you more. Each week we just hear or read such a short extract from a book of the Bible but it is also important to stand back and see the whole picture rather so my sermon today is sort of in two parts..the first is an overview of Mark's gospel, which is the gospel we will mainly be concentrating in this year's lectionary and then I will zoom in on a one verse to start us off in 2018.

The gospel of Mark is the earliest and shortest gospel account, probably written to the persecuted Roman Christians. Mark is mentioned quite often in the New Testament and was the son of a wealthy widow who lived in Jerusalem whose house might have been used for the Last Supper but it was definitely used as a house for prayer in Acts. He journeyed with both Paul and Peter and was a writer and teacher. Bishop Papias of Hieropolis who lived between 60-130AD, wrote of him "*John The Elder used to say: Mark, in his capacity as Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory—though not in an ordered form—of the things either said or done by the Lord*". The leading theory is that Peter is the eye-witness source but Mark is the literary genius behind the gospel. So that is the background..what about the plot? Well Mark splits the book into two parts as you can see from your handout..chapters 1-8 takes place over approximately three years in the area around Galilee whereas chapters 9-16 covers Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the Passover with chaps 11-16 is actually just over a week. One scholar calls Mark a Passion story with an extended introduction.

The first block is essentially saying the kIng, the Messiah is here and his name is Jesus, highlighting some important connections between Jesus, God, and God's kingdom..we have miracles, healings, parables and Jesus displays his authority. Mark begins, not with the birth of Jesus (as Matthew and Luke do), but rather with a general statement of introduction..*"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"* which has been debated by many theologians as to whether it has an undercurrent of being subversive - a political statement to counteract the Roman emperor Nero. As we do in the UK today, the Roman empire celebrated its emperor's birthday and it was called good news, alongside the inevitable battle successes This opening phrase or "incipit", as it is known, is followed by quotations from the Old Testament... "*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah*". Mark contends, as do all the New Testament writers, that one cannot understand Jesus apart from Jesus' own scriptures - the Old Testament. He mainly uses the book of Isaiah as many of the themes of Isaiah seem to be evoked or reenacted in Jesus' ministry. The picture of Peter on the timeline indicates the revealing of the Messiah to the disciples which we will look at during Lent.

The second block mainly concentrates on Jesus death and resurrection and there are quite a few references to the fact that he is not going to be the kind of king that would bring about the defeat of the Romans etc that Israel were expecting. Interestingly, both sections begin with God saying that Jesus is his Son but in the first part, Mark implies only Jesus heard it, whereas at the Transfiguration, his three closest disciples also heard it. There are three Passion prophecies, driving

the point home that He is going to Jerusalem, yes, as king, but he is going to suffer and to die. John Mark Comer, one of the theologians I listen to puts it like this: *instead of coming to bring judgment, Jesus the Messiah is here to bear judgement, instead of coming to punish the world for sin, Jesus is here to take on the world's sin, dying in our place and in so doing to heal the universe*. But the disciples find it difficult to comprehend until it actually happens.

One more thing...until the 1970s, this gospel was sometimes known as the neglected gospel. Its language is not refined. Its stories are not filled with vivid detail..no flower or bird stories. If a parallel account is found in Matthew or Luke, there is often a preference for those Gospels over Mark's telling. For much of Christian history, Mark has been considered the least of the Gospels, even if no one admitted it in public. Matthew and Luke certainly have their strengths over Mark as they used Mark in addition to other sources to construct a more "complete" narrative of Jesus' ministry. There is a sense in which Mark is a "first draft" of the gospel. However, in the 1970s, it came to the attention of much literary criticism and it is now recognised that there is an undercover genius to the Gospel of Mark available to the perceptive reader...and it is like reading a mystery story.

I would like to suggest that you sit down and read the whole of it in one go..I think you will be gripped. From the opening statement that Jesus is the Son of God to the Roman centurion recognising that fact when Jesus is on the cross..my young confirmation candidate was completely taken with it. The Biblical scholar Stephen Binz calls it "*a masterpiece that can lead the reader to the conclusion that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God while showing us his humanity through his emotions, passion and conviction*."

So much for the big picture..what about the one verse I want us to think about today. I might have asked you this question before, so if I have, please forgive me... Who or what do you follow? I don't know how many of you are on Twitter and so might follow politicians or people who you respect or even might have quite a few of your own followers. According to Wikipedia, the American singer Katy Perry has the most followers and the top UK tweeter, believe it or not, is the BBC Breaking News, down at 34th in the world, with Adele and singers from One Direction also in the top 50. The young today are so influenced by tweets and other social media. It could be said that Jesus was very advanced in his thinking - two thousand years or so...

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people" or *"fishers of men"* as an older translation puts it. Would you drop everything if someone had turned up at your workplace and asked you to follow him? I doubt it...don't think I would have! Yet Peter, Andrew, James & John did? Why did they ?

I want to quickly put this in context.... Galilee, where this occurred, was a hotbed for Rabbis and they only took those who had, in 21st century terms, got a phd in theology and knew the scriptures outside in. They would ask if they could follow a certain rabbi and then undergo quite a grilling about both the Hebrew scriptures and other rabbis' teaching to show off their brilliance before being accepted to become that rabbi's disciple. And then, if that happened, then your goal

would be three fold.

Firstly, you would learn your rabbis' teaching and his theology so that you thought as he thought by immersing yourself in the scriptures every day and really could know what he was going to say before he said it! Secondly you had to become like him ... John Mark Comer says that *the heart and soul of discipleship was imitation, to be like your rabbi, to copy his every move and as you were with him 24 hours a day you certainly saw how he went about his life at very close quarters* - As an aside, he goes on to ask...why did Peter get out of the boat during the storm? Because Peter's goal was to be just like his Rabbi, Jesus, and if Jesus walks on water, then he has to too! Thirdly, you then were to carry on your Rabbi's work in the world and go and make more disciples of that rabbi. So you might think that you would never have been asked by Jesus to follow him in those circumstances...but here is the thing...Peter and co were not in that top % or else they would have already been someone's disciples. These four were fishermen, plain & simple ...yet they were being asked by Jesus to follow him, not the other way round and also to be fishers of men. It was an AMAZING offer and they took it. Jesus was already showing no favouritism in either wealth or intelligence. He was looking at their potential and their hearts. William Barclay says in relation to these verses that we should never think so much of what we are but of what Jesus can make us and the disciples did indeed become fishers of men.

So what about us...do we consider ourselves followers of Jesus? Have we dropped things from our lives to follow him...be it doing wrong things or just from our daily routine? Peter, Andrew, James and John dropped and left their nets and family to follow Jesus and it might not be so drastic with us but, in this New year, would you like to become more like him? Then I suggest two things...why not, as I have already suggested, actually take the time to read Mark's gospel in one sitting to get the whole picture of who Jesus is. I am also going to give you a time of quiet to ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you can become more like him, to immerse yourself in Jesus...just as Paul pleads with the Thessalonians. What might you have to drop or leave behind? It might be that he does not make it obvious straight away, but if you ask him, expect to hear from him.