

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MATTHEW, MARK & LUKE

by Revd John Haley

SESSION FIVE NOT FORGETTING MARK

1. Mark Introduces Jesus and the Gospel

Reading: Mark 1:1-39; 2:1-17

2. Jesus Preaches and Heals in Galilee

Reading: Mark 3:7-12; 4:35-41; 5:1-43

3. Jesus, Messiah for Jews and Gentiles

Reading: Mark 6:1-3; 7:24-30; 8:22-9:13

4. Jesus Dies and Rises Again

Reading: Mark 14:12, 17-25, 32-46, 53, 66-72; 15:1-5, 22-27, 37-39; 16:1-7

Discussion questions:

How is *the* Gospel contained in *a* Gospel (here the Gospel of Mark)?

Why is it important to understand the miracles of Jesus as being literally true?

1. Mark Introduces Jesus and the Gospel

Reading: Mark 1:1-39; 2:1-17

One of the exciting things about Mark's Gospel is its simplicity. It provides a vivid and appealing account of the ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although the actual text does not name the writer, there is a strong early tradition that Mark, usually identified as John Mark of the New Testament, was its author. There must have been a good reason for this as Mark is not one of the principal leaders in the New Testament Church. Early tradition also associated this Gospel with the Apostle Peter, from whom Mark probably gained much of his information about Jesus. The church historian Eusebius made reference to the ancient writings of Papias who said that Mark had become Peter's interpreter. The attention to small details suggests that an eye-witness was one of Mark's significant sources. As Mark's Gospel makes no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 it is commonly accepted that the Gospel was written before that catastrophe.

Mark is often thought to have written the Gospel in Italy, perhaps even in Rome. His care in explaining Jewish customs that would be unfamiliar to Gentile readers (7:2-4; 15:42) and his translation of Aramaic words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22) suggest a Gentile readership. He also takes a special interest in issues such as persecution and martyrdom (8:34-38; 13:9-13), which would certainly have been challenges facing the Christians in Rome, particularly after the devastating fire that broke out in Rome in A.D. 64, which the Emperor Nero conveniently blamed on the Christians. As a result, Christians were covered in the skins of wild animals to be torn to death by dogs, fastened to crosses in the daytime and set alight as human torches by night. The suggestion that Mark wrote to Christians during a time of intense crisis sometime between A.D. 65 and A.D. 70 and, therefore, within a generation of the ministry, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus, has considerable evidence to support it. Mark prepares his readers for suffering by devoting one-third of his Gospel to the death of Jesus, showing the cost of being a follower of Jesus.

The Gospel begins by introducing Jesus. The first verse, 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' serves as a title. The word 'beginning' is significant because it reminds the reader of the opening of the Bible in Genesis. The 'Gospel' or Good News is that God has provided salvation for men and women through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mark's Gospel is called *a* Gospel because it contains *the* Gospel (Moule) something that is rooted in the coming of Jesus Christ.

'Jesus' is the Greek form of the Hebrew 'Joshua'. 'Christ' is the Greek word for 'anointed' behind which is the Hebrew word, 'Messiah'. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no nativity stories and though it is possible that he did not know them, it is more likely that he did not choose to include them as his purpose is theological and not biographical. Instead he begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, who appeared in the Judean desert 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' 'Repentance' literally means 'a change of mind' but is used to mean a 'deliberate turning'. His preaching about the coming of the Messiah raised popular expectation about one who would come to cleanse not merely with water but with the power of God himself.

All four Gospels record the baptism of Jesus, who through it identified fully with human nature. At the time of his baptism, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit, and proclaimed as the Son of God. The sense of urgency in Mark's writing is often indicated by 'immediately' or 'at once'. After a brief reference to the temptation of Jesus, not so much a one off event as a continuous battle, Mark launches right in to an account of the Galilean ministry of Jesus and the call of the first disciples. The message of Jesus is clearly stated, 'The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15). Jesus' actions show that God's kingly rule is working in him and bringing him into conflict with the powers of evil, over which he is victorious.

2. Jesus Preaches and Heals in Galilee

Reading: Mark 3:7-12; 4:35-41; 5:1-43

Mark devotes a considerable part of his gospel to the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus in Galilee. The section begins with Jesus withdrawing to the lakeside, though not, it seems, from the great crowds, from all over Palestine, that followed him. Mark offers no explanation for this but from Matthew (12:15) it appears that Jesus did this to avoid direct conflict with the religious authorities as the time had not yet come for a serious confrontation.

The crowds following Jesus came not only from the area of Capernaum but also from much further south, Judea and Idumea, from the east, across the Jordan, and from Tyre and Sidon in the northwest. Idumea was an area settled by the Edomites after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Herod the Great (the 'Christmas Herod' who was also responsible for the enlargement of the Temple at Jerusalem) was an Idumean and not a Jew. The regions across the Jordan probably included Perea and the Decapolis, an area of ten cities. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were often used to represent the whole area in the north-western part of Palestine.

While the detail about the 'small boat' (3:9) does not seem very important, Mark's regular attention to such small, visual details is characteristic of his Gospel and reflects the contribution of an eye-witness. The purpose of the boat was to provide an escape for Jesus in the event of the crowd becoming unruly, not least by pressing forward to touch Jesus in the hope of being healed. While the crowds do not appear to know the true identity of Jesus, it is clear that the evil spirits recognised him. In the ancient world it was commonly believed that knowing someone's name gave some kind of power or authority over them. If that is the case then the demonic effort to overpower Jesus by declaring his true identity was futile.

There is a variety of miracles recorded in the Gospel and the calming of the storm on the Lake of Galilee is a good example of a nature miracle. Again the story contains a number of eye-witness details, not least Jesus being asleep on the cushion normally located in the stern of the boat. The modern mind finds such miracles difficult but alternative explanations to the purely supernatural, such as coincidence, myth or imagination are inadequate. In the New Testament it is clear that Jesus is not only Lord over the church but also Lord of all creation. Such a nature miracle demonstrates Jesus' true identity and it is our understanding of his true identity that shapes our interpretation of the miracle stories – it is our answer to the important question the disciples ask, "Who is this?"

Jesus demonstrated his power over nature by calming the storm and further demonstrated his power over the forces of evil by casting out demons from a possessed man. Together the two stories reveal the true divinity of Jesus. The region of the Decapolis was a largely gentile area, indicated by the presence of a large herd of pigs, animals that the Jews considered unclean. The fate of the pigs is sometimes thought of as being unwarranted – why would Jesus command the demons to enter the pigs only for them to destroy themselves? A tentative suggestion is that in so doing Jesus showed the destructive power of the demons and his authority over them.

Mark possibly links the stories of the woman with the haemorrhage, the healing of Jairus' daughter and the story of the healing of the demoniac because they all have to do with ritual uncleanness. According to Jewish law, contact with graves, blood, or death made one ceremonially unclean. Jesus' phrase to the woman, 'go in peace' (5:34), 'means not just freedom from inward anxiety but wholeness or completeness of life that comes from being brought into a right relationship with God' (Anderson). At Jairus' house, Jesus took the little girl who had died by the hand and spoke to her in Aramaic, which Mark helpfully translates for Gentile readers. The reaction of the five witnesses to the miracle was one of amazement but Jesus' true power was not more widely revealed at this stage.

3. Jesus, Messiah for Jews and Gentiles

Reading: Mark 6:1-3; 7:24-30; 8:22-9:13

From the lakeside, Jesus moved inland and journeyed through the hills of Galilee, his home country, for, although he was born in Bethlehem, this is where he had been brought up and lived prior to his travelling ministry. At Nazareth, Jesus went into the synagogue that he had attended so many times before and began to teach. This was probably the first time that the people from his home community had heard him teach and, while many of them were amazed, others took offence at him and this seems to be the reason that Jesus left Galilee, eventually arriving in Judea and Jerusalem.

Jesus' mission to the Gentiles is an important theme in Mark's Gospel. Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) in which the city of Tyre was located, is situated to the northwest of Galilee. Mark does not tell us why Jesus went there or how far he journeyed into this territory though it is a possibility that he went there to get out of the public eye, perhaps to rest and to prepare himself spiritually for what he knew lay ahead of him, but his fame had spread and people still sought him out. One of those seeking Jesus out was a Greek woman, born in Syrian Phoenicia (traditionally Syro-Phoenicia). Mark uses 'Greek' in its broadest sense meaning 'Gentile' rather than someone born in what we would call 'Greece'. Syro or Syrian Phoenicia is that part of the territory that administratively belonged to Syria rather than Libyo-Phoenicia in North Africa. The significance of the story is that the message and ministry of Jesus extended also to the Gentiles, even to the woman's daughter that Jesus did not meet. A further miracle, the healing of a blind man (8:22-26), took place at Bethsaida ('house of fish') on the east bank of the River Jordan. The importance of this story for Mark is that it anticipates the opening of the eyes of understanding of the disciples.

Peter's confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi is the climax of the disciples' recognition of Jesus as Messiah. Peter's confession revealed real insight into the nature of Christ's person and mission, but his concept of Jesus' messiahship was far from being perfect. Peter still had much to learn of the Messiah's suffering, rejection, and death, something revealed by what Peter said immediately after and Jesus' consequent rebuke. Jesus told the disciples not to tell others about his being the Messiah because he realised that the disciples did not yet fully understand what his being Messiah would mean. They still needed instruction about it before they would be given permission to proclaim it without restraint.

In the passion prediction that followed Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus referred to himself as 'Son of Man'. In the Psalms this title means simply 'man' (Psalms 8:4; 80:17). In Ezekiel, where it occurs over ninety times, it is the particular name by which God addresses the prophet. However, in Daniel (7:13-14), the 'Son of Man' is the heavenly figure who brings the kingdom of God to the oppressed on earth. Jesus considered 'Son of Man' a messianic title because, immediately following Peter's confession of him as the Christ, he began to teach them about the ministry of the Son of Man (equivalent to Christ, 8:29), though a ministry in which the Son of Man, the Messiah would suffer, was unthinkable. Jesus then showed that the way of discipleship is the way of the cross. To bear the cross is to follow Jesus, which can mean suffering and even death (something all too familiar to the Christians at Rome).

The Transfiguration is a revelation of the glory of the Son of God, a glory now hidden but to be manifested completely and openly at the end of the age. The purpose of the Transfiguration was directed toward the disciples. Mark places the Transfiguration here as a confirmation of the difficult teaching Jesus had given the disciples about his suffering and death (8:31-38). An additional revelation of God's purpose in his Son was needed. To a select group of Jesus' disciples, this comes in the Transfiguration with God's voice booming out of the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (9:7). This was a direct order given to Peter, James, and John - and through them to the rest of the Twelve - to heed Jesus' disclosure at Caesarea Philippi.

4. Jesus Dies and Rises Again

Reading: Mark 14:12, 17-25, 32-46, 53, 66-72; 15:1-5, 22-27, 37-39;
16:1-7

The Passover was an eight day celebration, sometimes referred to as the 'Feast of Unleavened Bread'. Jesus and the disciples were staying at Bethany but the Passover had to be eaten within the city of Jerusalem so it was necessary to find a suitable venue. The Passover had to be eaten between sunset and midnight, what for us would be the Thursday evening but by Jewish reckoning, when the new day began at sunset, would be the first few hours of Friday. The Passover meal was originally eaten standing: "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover" (Exodus 12:11). However, in Jesus' time it had become customary to eat it in a reclining position. Using the solemn formula, "I tell you the truth", Jesus announced that one of the Twelve, one at the table, would betray him. The shock felt by the disciples is evidenced by their questioning, "Surely not I?"

There are four accounts of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament, recorded in Matthew (26:26-30), Mark (14:22-26), Luke (22:19-20) and 1 Corinthians (11:23-25). All four include the taking of the bread which was the unleavened bread of the Passover, the thanksgiving or blessing, the breaking of the bread, the saying "This is my body", and the taking of the cup (probably the third cup of the Passover meal). That Jesus did not mean that the bread became his body is clear. He often used symbolic language to speak of himself. There is no indication that the bread was changed. It remained ordinary bread but the bread symbolised his body (his abiding presence) and the wine symbolised his blood about to be shed. Paul adds Jesus' command to continue to celebrate the supper in which the church should remember the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus and love him, embrace him by faith and look forward in living hope to his glorious return. The word 'many' means not just the disciples but 'everyone' – the blood of Christ is poured out for all, the whole human race. Passover meals ended with singing the second part of the Hallel (Psalms 115-118).

The account of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane reveals his humanity. He was not above temptation and was deeply distressed and troubled with the divine plan of salvation. Jesus' command to the disciples to keep watch could mean either that they were to stay awake and so share in his agony or that they were to be on the lookout for those Jesus knew were on their way to arrest him. Judas certainly knew the place where Jesus was accustomed to pray. Jesus did not die as a martyr but as the Lamb of God bearing the penalty for the sins of the world, as the wrath of God was turned loose on him. Uniquely, Jesus used the word '*Abba*' to address his 'Father', an especially intimate word used by children to their father but not normally used in prayer. Jesus believed that with God anything was possible and therefore prayed for the cup (of wrath) to be removed from him. In the Old Testament cup is regularly used as a metaphor for judgement and punishment. As it was past midnight, the disciples were overwhelmed with sleep but it was a crucial time and they should have stayed awake.

It was customary for disciples to greet their rabbi with a kiss but it was nonetheless a treacherous thing of Judas to do. It was commendable that Peter made it as far as the High Priest's courtyard but it became the venue for his denial. His affirmation at Caesarea Philippi, 'you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,' was completely reversed so that he said 'I don't even know the man.' It is a lesson showing the weakness and vulnerability of every disciple.

After being condemned to death Jesus was compelled to carry the cross. Both Roman and Jewish executions were customarily performed outside the city. Mark simply says, "And they crucified him" (15:24). The curtain torn from top to bottom (15:38) was the one that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in the temple. The centurion's conclusion, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (15:39) is a fitting epitaph, only surpassed by the triumph of the resurrection.