

Isaiah 55:6 - 13
Psalm 126
1 Peter 5:5 - 14
Mark 16:9 - 20

Mark, the Lion and Satan

The picture at the front is a page, which introduces the Gospel according to Mark in the Book of Kells, a ninth century manuscript. The symbols of the four Evangelists are there, which the Church adopted at an early stage, based on four beasts, which appear in Ezekiel, and the book of Revelation. The link between the beasts and the Evangelists places them in close relationship to the throne of God. Hence the saying: *there are many saints but only four evangelists*. In some churches you will find the four evangelists painted on the ceiling over the altar. As for the figures, each has a different meaning. Matthew is symbolised by a man because of the humanity of his gospel, Luke by an ox because of his stress on Christ as the sacrificial victim. John's symbol is an eagle because the evangelist soared to heaven to gain a brilliant vision of the truth. Mark's symbol, also found on the flag and the rear of the Paschal candle, is a winged lion. Some say Mark has the lion because he stressed Christ's power and sovereignty. Others say it is because he begins with "the voice crying in the wilderness," and knew how the roar of the lion disturbed the peace of the Judean hills.

There are many references to the lion in world cultures. Widely regarded as the sovereign of beasts, a bold destructive creature whose roaring inspired fear, many Divinities are depicted riding on a lion. In biblical tradition the lion is widely used as a metaphor. The wicked "lurked in secret like a lion" (Ps 10:9). The wrath of the king was compared with the lion's growling (Prov 19:12). The revolutionary leader Judas Maccabaeus was thought of as a "lion in his deeds" and the Messiah was imagined to be the Lion of Judah (Rev 5:5). The Lord was likened to a lion (Job 10:16, Hos 13:7) while in the apocalyptic literature the addition of wings symbolised semi-divine power. The prophets imagined a future time of blessedness when the lion would be absent or domesticated (Isaiah 35:9, 11:6-7, 65:25). Consistent with this hope of a world where evil is overcome, the lion appears in the traditions of the early Desert mothers and fathers as friendly and protective. The king of beasts is a friend to the saints of God. The lion was used to depict Christ as judge and Christ the teacher, and frequently carries a book or a scroll. Some Christian graves were decorated with a lion, which was a symbol of resurrection.

Since Mark is widely believed to be the first Gospel writer it may be no accident the first among the beasts has become his symbol. That Mark's lion is both winged and carries a book speaks of pre-eminent spiritual power and a message of significance. As our flag shows, the book is inscribed with the word euangellion - Gospel, which means good news: a message, which is preached, and believed. Mark's message came in a context of death, destruction and pressure. He wrote his gospel against a backdrop of the Jewish Roman war of 66-70 CE, which ended in the desecration and destruction of the Temple. Despite working in a context rather like modern Baghdad, Mark's interest is not in the war, but in a profound struggle between good and evil that takes place in

connection with the life and death of Jesus. The war changed things radically for the Jews, but for Mark the struggle Jesus engaged in permanently changed things on a universal scale. Named at his Baptism as the beloved Son, Jesus is immediately engaged in spiritual conflict. The first episode is when the Spirit of God led him into the wilderness, like the people of old, where he was tempted by Satan. Mark is typically cryptic about this encounter, and makes little reference to Satan after this. But immediately following Jesus begins to teach and heal, and people are amazed at his authority and power. Mark is not anti Jewish or anti Semitic. But he does imply that Jesus' enemies were energised by Satan. The religious authorities who accused Jesus of doing the work of Satan and conspire to kill him are shown as retaliating against what the Spirit of God is doing in the world through the beloved Son. Jesus continues to struggle, as his prayer in Gethsemane shows, but he is not diverted from his goal. All the Gospels agree that his death, which seemed to signal the victory of evil and death, actually heralds its being overcome by the power of suffering love.

The strength of the winged lion with a Gospel, is set alongside the power of Satan. Much has been made of Satan in the traditions of the church, and in the history of Western Culture. In early biblical tradition Satan was one of God's angels who became an antagonist and rival and seems to have been made vicar general of the world. Satan is found on the side of the Government and can quote scripture. Compared with later traditions, Mark characteristically understates Satan, but this does not lessen his significance. Satan is the adversary: the power, which blocks or opposes, and incites crowds. Satan seeks to divert people from doing the will of God, as the serpent did in the Garden, as the religious leaders did in Mark, and as Peter did when Jesus spoke of his coming passion and death. In all cases Satan is not a being from another realm or even another culture. Satan is power expressed within this realm through one like us, or even one of us. What is so pertinent here is that Satan is not the distant enemy or the "other" whom we demonise out of fear. Satan is the intimate enemy, a trusted colleague, a sister or brother who leads us to miss the mark. But as we know, so often humans have projected all their fear and inadequacy on strangers and demonised them with devastating results.

Mark recognized the challenge of the power represented by Satan, but his good news aims to show that there was one in whom his power was overcome. The fearful silence of the disciples after the death was finally breached by the obedience to Jesus' command, which took the good news into all the world. A marvellous list of accompanying signs is given, but the greatest wonder is that the message of the Gospel entrusted to such people went forth. It was the power of the Risen One, which brought this about. Our own Basis of Union says: ...*Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith. In his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews ... his church.* Hard hearts, fearful messengers and the power of adversity did not limit the work of God. Mark's winged lion with a book of the Gospel is the sign that what he has given us comes in the strength of the power that really does rule. What matters is that we allow nothing to come between us, and the one to whom he points.

1 Peter gives us a little problem in that Satan is likened to a prowling lion, which is seeking to devour the flock of Christ. Like Mark, Peter wrote for people who had experienced trials, or were under pressure. He called his audience, by their positive faith and trust in God, to resist being devoured, in the form of having their faith undermined. He spoke in the assurance of Christ's ongoing presence with the church

and called the people to continue turn to Christ, and turn away from the false values of the world, just as we do at every Baptism.

There are churches today, which make much of the signs and wonders at the end of Mark, but we do not recommend proving faith by handling snakes or drinking poison. But those who give themselves to live in the costly, self-denying work of showing forth the gospel, may find their faith confirmed in tangible ways. There are churches today which live on conspiracy theories and make much of what Satan is up to, participating in all sorts of projections. They name their enemies or the enemies of the Empire as evil, while being unaware of the evil which is their own.

We do not underrate the power Satan which is the power of self-serving, but we live in a different strength. Thanks to what Mark and the other evangelists have given us, we are able to see otherness is not necessarily evil. And we accept the challenge of loving our enemies, realizing that hatred and suspicion is evil, but reconciliation is divine.