

Easter 5
28/4/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
Mark 1:1-15

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Mark the Evangelist is our name and each year at this time we celebrate our connection with Mark whom we have named so precisely. Why so precise? Well I don't know what arguments were considered when the decision was taken, but we can be thankful for this precision. Without it we could be wondering just what there is about Mark we are choosing to remember. There are a number of traditions that claim our Mark. He was the man who carried water to the upper room for the last supper (is there a connection here with our weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper) and the man who ran away naked at Jesus' arrest (I have no suggestions for any connections there). Other connections include John Mark who was a missionary companion and cousin of Barnabus.

Whatever other reasons were brought to bear on our decision I am confident that we rejoice in the name 'Mark the Evangelist' because he wrote the oldest of the Gospels of Jesus Christ. The Greek for the words we translate as evangelist and for gospel are the same - εὐαγγελιστής and εὐαγγέλιον. This suggests that it would not be improper to call Mark the gospel writer, or even Mark the gospeller.

Now, here is a question – why call Mark an evangelist, a gospel writer. Why not call him an historian or a story teller? What did gospellers do before they had Jesus to write about? Well a gospeller announced important events that had happened or were about to happen that had an impact on the people. These could include announcements about a general's victory in battle or the imminent arrival of a person of significance – a king for example. These announcements were good news stories because a victory over the people's political enemies or the arrival of a king complete with armed forces told of greater security for the people – at least that would have been the intent of the message. A gospel had a salvific message. This, of course, is why we have often translated gospel as good news.

It is significant that the church, that Mark, thought to write the story of Jesus in a literary tradition belonging to the announcement of a military victory or the coming of a king. This morning Anne has read for us the opening verses of Mark's gospel of Jesus. It is worth noting the difference between his beginning and the beginning of the other three gospels, particularly Matthew and Luke.

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, ^{Matthew 1:1} *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.* It is as if Matthew is presenting Jesus' credentials as a monarch, and not just any monarch, but our monarch in the heritage of our kings. He is descended from King David, our greatest king. He is descended from Abraham, the father of our race. If what follows is a gospel and gospels are all about really important people like kings and generals, then Jesus' ancestry allows his story to be a gospel, an announcement about an event, about a person who brought freedom to all people – this is a salvific message.

Luke did a similar thing with the birth story, making a connection with King David. It wasn't predominantly a technique to give their writings gospel status. It was the way credentials were understood in the ancient world, very particularly in the Roman world. It has to do with 'glory'. Because the gospels were written in Greek we inherit an understanding of glory as predominantly a divine quality. *Glory to God in the highest*. But there was also a Roman world and in Latin glory is a quality that belongs in families and each family has status according to the glory attributed to it by the heroic deeds of its members. Achieving military victories or attaining political rank added to the family's glory. A family that had achieved the glory of nobility was one where at least one member of the family had been elected consul. Within that understanding Jesus' family already has glory as descendant from David.

Mark is well aware of the King David connection. But only gets round to mentioning it in chapter ten when a beggar calls out ^{Mark 10:47} "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*"

But Mark is comfortable allowing Jesus to establish his own credentials without ancestry. He announces right from the jump: ^{Mark 1:1} *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Then he starts to deal with the problem that all the gospel writers deal with – John the Baptist. Problem? What problem? Well the infant church had to grapple with the reality that there were two teachers attracting attention at about the same time and people were genuinely confused as to which to follow. There was John the Baptist and there was Jesus of Nazareth. Is one of these the Christ, the Messiah of God, and if so, which one? Each of the gospel writers declare clearly what the church quickly realised, that John was the forerunner to Jesus. John preached ^{Mark 1:8} *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

Then Mark tells how Jesus came and was baptised by John. Mark says: ^{Mark 1:9-10} *9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* The one of whom John said would baptise with the Holy Spirit is himself baptised with water, and the Holy Spirit.

All this has happened very quickly in Mark. In the next sentence he deals with Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. And after John is arrested then Jesus appeared in Galilee, and now, at last Mark is going to tell us what the gospel, the good news of Jesus is all about. Mark writes: ^{Mark 1:14-15} *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* That's the good news – the nearness of the realm of God. This is the one point where Mark makes the connection that the gospel of Jesus is about the kingdom of God. It is very near so change your mind or turn around, a handy translation for 'repent', change your mind and believe in how near God has come, turn towards life.

In our baptism we are called to turn away from darkness and turn towards the light of Christ. In our baptism there is the obvious pouring of water, but listen how often the Holy Spirit gets a mention. In our baptism we hear through word and watch in the symbolism of passing through water the salvific gospel, the announcement that in Jesus death and resurrection a victory, our victory has been won. In our baptism we are born anew into the heritage of Christ's glory.
