

A  
FRIENDLY  
GUIDE TO

# MARK'S GOSPEL

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# PREFACE

Only a year ago, John Garratt Publishing made available my little book *A friendly guide to the New Testament* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2010). I am delighted that *A friendly guide to the New Testament* has been so well received, and has helped many people to be gently led into a more informed reading of the books that form part of the literature regarded by all Christians as sacred Scripture. This new ‘friendly guide’ is an attempt to take that process one step further. Within the covers of *A friendly guide to the New Testament* there are five chapters that remain fundamental for what follows: the emergence of the Gospels (pp 14–15), Jesus of Nazareth (pp 25–27), the synoptic Gospels (pp 29–30), and the two chapters on the Gospel of Mark (pp 31–33, 34–35).

This is an easier book to use. I can now focus upon one single book in the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark. I will be your ‘friendly guide’ through this challeng-

ing story of Jesus. It has long been my concern that, despite the exhortations of the Second Vatican Council and Church leadership since then, many Christians, including most Catholics, are unaware of the authority and power of our biblical tradition. For too many it is unreachable, but for even more, it is not worth the trouble.

This book is based upon my earlier work on the Gospel of Mark, especially *The Gospel of Mark: A commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) and *A year with Mark* (Strathfield: St Paul Publications, 2011). What follows is a further attempt to reach out to all Christians who live under the Word of God, to unlock a powerful story about Jesus, written in rough Greek almost two thousand years ago.

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# WHEN, WHERE AND WHO?

**T**he first readers of the Gospel of Mark encountered a surprising story of Jesus. That was its value. It meant so much to them that they passed it on to successive generations. As we will see, it first appeared about AD 70, shortly after the Letters of Paul, who was executed in AD 64. Mark wrote the first 'Gospel', a *story* of the 'good news' of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the only thing that really matters. But that does not eliminate our curiosity. Something must be said about when this Gospel was written, where it was written, and who wrote it.

In Mark 13, after an introduction (vv 1–4), Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end of Jerusalem (vv 5–23) and the end of the world (vv 24–37). In verses 5 to 23 Jesus speaks of the dangers of false prophets and false Messiahs (vv 5–6, 21–22), and of wars and rumours of wars (vv 7–8, 14–20). He talks about the desolating sacrilege set up in the Temple of Jerusalem (v 14). These details all refer to events that happened before and during the Jewish revolt against Rome that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The readers of the Gospel of Mark were aware of what was happening or had just happened in Jerusalem. Could this be the end of time, the coming of God's Messiah and judge? Jesus tells his disciples, and Mark tells his readers: 'the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations' (v 10).

There will be an end time (see vv 24–37), but not yet. The Gospel was written around AD 70 to instruct Christians to live bravely, giving witness to Jesus and preaching the Gospel in the in-between time (vv 9–13).

Mark 13 also offers some idea of where it was written and first read and heard. There is an ancient tradition that links this Gospel with Peter and Rome, but that is not likely. The first people who heard this story of Jesus were close enough to know of the war and rumours of wars, and thought that this might be the end. They were probably from northern Palestine or southern Syria. They waited anxiously as the Jewish War drew to its inevitable end, and wondered about the final coming of the Messiah.

Who was 'Mark'? The title 'according to Mark' was not found on the earliest scrolls and books that contained the Gospel. But it was added very early, and was certainly there by the end of the second Christian century. From then on, this story of Jesus has always been known as 'the Gospel according to Mark', even though we are not certain who 'Mark' was. The tradition that associated the Gospel with Peter and Rome also mentions Mark as a 'secretary' or 'interpreter' for Peter. But this does not do justice to the proximity of the first readers and listeners to Israel and Jerusalem.

However, a person named Mark may well have been the author of

the Gospel. Mark was a common name, and there is an unfortunate 'Mark' in the early part of the story of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 12:24–25; 15:37–38). Whoever Mark was, he was not an apostle. If the name 'Mark' was attached to the Gospel in the second century, it is more than likely that the scribes who attached that name knew of a tradition of a man named Mark who wrote this Gospel. We cannot be sure, but we will respect the tradition that reaches back to the second century, and always speak of the author as 'Mark', whoever he might have been.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Mark's Gospel is the shortest Gospel — 675 verses
- It is now accepted as the first Gospel to be written
- About 95% of the content of Mark's Gospel is reproduced in the Gospel of Matthew



# JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

**T**he most important ‘character’ in the story of Jesus told by Mark is Jesus. The early Christians already had a memory of his life and ministry, but it had never been written down like this before. More than that, it had never been called ‘good news’. The English word ‘gospel’ is a translation of a Greek word that means ‘good news’. Indeed, ‘gospel’ comes from an Old English word (*god-spel*) that also means ‘good news’. There are very few scenes in Mark’s story where Jesus is not at the centre of the action. From the early stages of the Gospel (see 1:16–20), Jesus calls others to join him. He asks a group of people to ‘follow’ him. They are his disciples, and from among them he appoints a smaller group: ‘the twelve’ (see 3:13–19).

The relationship between Jesus and the disciples is crucial for the message that Mark wishes to communicate through his story. As we attempt to follow Jesus in our own time, we can identify with the disciples in the story. Towards the end of the story a group of women begin to play an increasingly important role. Their role is closely associated with the disciples. Indeed, as we will see, they succeed where the male disciples fail. Mark’s story presents a vivid picture of Jesus and the disciples. The disciples and the chosen Twelve respond generously and willingly (1:16–20; 2:17; 3:13–19). In the early part of the story, they share willingly in his ministry, as they witness his miracles, and

listen to his preaching (see chapters 4 and 5).

However, they wonder who he might be, and Jesus expresses, for the first time, his disappointment in them (4:40–41). Nevertheless, a high point is reached, after the disciples ask further questions about Jesus which continue to disappoint



him, when he asks them at Caesarea Philippi who they think he is. The belief of the disciples is expressed in the words of Peter: ‘You are the Christ’ (NRSV: ‘Messiah’) (8:29). The reader knows from the very first line in the story (1:1) that this is a correct understanding of Jesus, but there are different ways of understanding what it means to be ‘the Christ’. There is a danger that the disciples might think that Jesus is an all-powerful conquering hero, come to save Israel from the Roman oc-

cupation, and to restore the Davidic kingdom.

The story has reached a turning point. Immediately following Peter’s confession, Jesus begins to speak about his response to God as the Son of Man who must suffer many things, be killed and on the third day rise again (8:31). Across the second half of the story, as Jesus journeys towards Jerusalem with his disciples, he repeats this prediction on two further occasions (9:31; 10:32–34), and the disciples begin to experience fear and disappointment about what might lie ahead of them (10:32). But he does not abandon them. He calls them to himself and instructs them on the need to take up their own cross, to abandon all pretensions of grandeur and success so that they might be servants. They are followers of the Son of Man who came, not to be served, but to serve (10:45).

At a final meal, the night before he dies, he predicts that one of them will betray him, another will deny him, and that all the rest will abandon him as they flee from danger. But in the midst of these predictions of failure, he gives himself to them in the broken bread and the shared wine of a meal that is the foreshadowing of all the Eucharistic celebrations since that night. Jesus goes on giving himself unconditionally, out of love for his disciples from all eras who never love him in the way he has loved us (14:17–25).

Jesus’ predictions come true. Judas betrays him, Peter denies

Follow me  
and I will make you  
fish for  
people.

him, and all the disciples flee in fear. In the original version of the Gospel of Mark that ends at 16:8, the brief announcement that all the disciples deserted him and fled (14:50) marks the final appearance of the disciples as a collective group of 'characters' who were chosen by Jesus to follow him. Peter does make an appearance later in chapter 14 as an individual, not as a follower of Jesus.

But at the empty tomb the young man tells the women that Jesus is no longer where he was laid after his death. He has been raised by God, and they are to announce this Easter message to the disciples and Peter. Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee. There they will see him, as he had told them (16:6–7). The story of a relationship between Jesus, now the risen Jesus, and his disciples, is about to begin again, despite their failure, in Galilee. This is where it began; this is where it will be resumed. But the women, like the disciples, are so

struck with fear that they run away and do not say anything to anyone (16:8).

This is where the original Gospel closed. Later scribes, unhappy with this ending, so different to the endings of Matthew 28, Luke 24 and John 20, added a longer ending (16:9–20). But Mark's surprising story ends with Jesus' words, first uttered at the last meal (14:28), ringing out again: 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him' (16:7). For Mark, and for believing Christians, the word of Jesus does not fail. He is going before them into Galilee. Discipleship goes on, not because the original disciples or even the more courageous women succeeded. We are contemporary Christians because God meets us in his Son, going before us, despite our failures, into the Galilee of our future as he did with the original disciples. There we shall see him.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- 'Christ' is a title given to Jesus, not part of his name. It comes from the Greek word *Christos* meaning 'anointed'. This has the same meaning as 'Messiah', which is Hebrew in origin
- Peter's declaration about Jesus: 'You are the Christ' (8:29) is a central moment in the Gospel
- Jesus instructs the disciples to be silent about Peter's words because he is concerned that his message will be interpreted in a political rather than spiritual way





# MARK'S WAY OF TELLING THE STORY OF JESUS

The four different Gospel stories of Jesus are one of the great treasures of the Christian tradition. There can never be 'one story' that captures the breadth and depth of the mystery of what God has done for us in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. We are privileged to have *four stories* regarded by Christian tradition as 'inspired' as part of our sacred Scriptures. Our task is to single out and try to understand the *uniqueness* of the story of Jesus as Mark told it, and to see the riches that this particular story brings into our understanding of Jesus, and of ourselves.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest, but in some ways the most challenging, of the four Gospels. From what we have already seen in tracing the relationship between Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel, it is clear that there are at least two parts to the Gospel. The first is set in Galilee, and it closes with Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus' prohibiting the disciples to say anything about this (8:29–30). The rest of the story has Jesus and the disciples either 'on the way' to Jerusalem, or in Jerusalem. The second half of the story tells the surprising message that Jesus can only be the Messiah and the Son of God as the suffering and dying Son of Man who will be raised by God. It is predicted (see 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34) and then acted out in the account of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection (14:1 – 16:8).

These two major sections of the story can be further refined. The Gospel begins with a short section, dedicated to the figure of John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus, at the end of which *the reader or listener* has been fully introduced to the mystery of the person of Jesus.

rich man, the scribe, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Pilate]) *have not read the prologue of Mark 1:1–13*.

The first half of Jesus' story in Mark, set in Galilee, tells of Jesus' ministry, bringing in the reigning presence of God as King ('the kingdom of God'). His teaching,



Like Matthew 1:1 – 4:16, Luke 1:1 – 4:13 and John 1:1–18, Mark 1:1–13 serves as a 'prologue' to the Gospel of Mark. Only the reader and the listener become aware of what is revealed in Mark 1:1–13. The characters in the story, especially the disciples, but also all the other characters (crowds, Romans, Jesus' family, and certain individuals who encounter Jesus [for example, the

his miracles and his encounters with others make people wonder who he might be. In fact, there are three groups of people whose close encounter with Jesus is recorded in Mark 1:13 – 8:30. From 1:13 to 3:6 Jesus clashes with the Jewish leaders. This section closes with their plan to kill him (3:6). From 3:7 to 6:6a Jesus establishes a new family that replaces his natural, blood

family, and he instructs them by parables and through his miracles (4:1 – 5:43). This section closes when the people from his own town reject him, and Jesus is astounded at their lack of belief in him (6:1–6a). The final section is dominated by the association of the disciples with the ministry of Jesus, especially highlighted by the two bread miracles (6:31–44; 8:1–9). It closes at Caesarea Philippi, with Peter's confession, in the name of all the disciples, that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus' warning that they should not speak about this (8:29–30).

As in 1:13 – 8:30, there are three sections to the second half of the Gospel. They tell and then show that he is Messiah and Son of God as a suffering and victorious Son of Man. As the section that closed the first half of the Gospel focused on the disciples, the first section of the second half is dedicated almost entirely to Jesus' attempt to lead them from blindness to sight (see the hint in 8:22–26). But they will not and cannot accept that he will be Messiah only as a suffering Son of Man (8:31 – 10:52). The second section begins as Jesus enters Jerusalem. There we find a series of 'endings'. Jesus brings to an end Temple worship (11:1–27) and the Jewish institutions (11:28 – 12:44), and he speaks of the end of Jerusalem and the end of the world (13:1–37). The third of the three sections is made up of the story of Jesus' trials, suffering and death (14:1 – 15:46). At his death a Roman centurion, the first human being in the story to make a full confession of faith, looks at how Jesus died, and announces that Jesus was truly the Son of God (15:39).

I do not include the account of Jesus' resurrection in the second half of the Gospel story because I regard the events reported in 16:1–8, at the empty tomb, as being directed to disciples of all times.

Just as the prologue of 1:1–13 was directed only to the listener and the reader, the enigmatic ending of Mark's account of the empty tomb also asks questions of the disciple. As the women have fled in fear, and said nothing to anyone, how is Jesus' promise that he is going before his disciples into Galilee, and that there they will see him, fulfilled (16:7–8)? It is fulfilled in the lives of all subsequent disciples who have read or listened to this Gospel. They guarantee that Jesus' promise to be with us in Galilee comes true. I therefore suggest that 16:1–8 serves as an 'epilogue' challenging the readers and listeners, just as the 'prologue' (1:1–13) challenged the readers and the listeners. The epilogue may appear at the end of the story, but it is a promise of a new beginning.

More schematically, what I have just written looks like this:

1. Prologue: the beginning (1:1–13)
2. The mystery of Jesus (1:14 – 8:30)
  - a. Jesus and the leaders of Israel (1:14 – 3:6)
  - b. Jesus and his new family (3:7 – 6:6a)
  - c. Jesus and his disciples (6:6b – 8:30)
3. The suffering and vindicated Son of Man: Jesus is Christ and Son of God (8:31 – 15:47)
  - a. Leading the disciples from blindness to sight (8:31 – 10:52)
  - b. The symbolic end of Israel and the world (11:1 – 13:37)
  - c. The crucifixion and death of Jesus, Son of Man, Christ and Son of God (14:1 – 15:47)
4. Epilogue: a new beginning (16:1–8).

As I 'tell the story', I will pause from time to time to devote a little more attention to major passages for our understanding of Jesus and what it means to be his disciple, and to other passages that serve as dramatic turning points in the story.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have much in common but each tells the story of Jesus in a slightly different way
- Each Gospel was written for a particular group to address particular needs
- The way each story is told reflects the major religious and social problems each community had to face





# THE PROLOGUE: MARK 1:1–13

All the Gospels have a prologue. This means that when the reader has come to the end of the prologue, she or he has had a clear idea of *who* Jesus is and *what* he has done. This is the case for the prologues of all the Gospels. Where they differ is in what follows. Each Gospel has a different way of telling Jesus' life to show — by means of God's gracious and surprising action in our human story — *how* Jesus was the Son of God, Messiah and Saviour.

The first part of verses 1 to 13 is dedicated to John the Baptist, but two voices speak in verses 1 to 3. The first voice is the authoritative voice of Mark, announcing the beginning of the 'good news' that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God (v 1). The use of the expression 'beginning' has two meanings. Mark tells his readers that they are at the beginning of a story. But he also looks back to another 'beginning', the beginning of God's creating presence, recorded in the Book of Genesis, which also opened with the word 'beginning'. The good news is that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, and a new creation is at hand. The second voice speaks: the *Word of God* (vv 2–3). Speaking through his prophet Isaiah, God announces that he will send a messenger to prepare the way of 'the Lord'. The good news that follows will be about Jesus, Christ, Son of God and Lord.

The second stage in the prologue is reported by Mark (vv 4–6). John the Baptist does not come

## MARK 1:1–13

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,' "

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

into the action. Mark tells of the partial fulfilment of God's promise in the announcement, appearance and description of the forerunner, the one who is to prepare the way. Next the Baptist speaks (vv 7–8). He announces the coming of the one 'more powerful', one before whom the forerunner is totally unworthy. The stronger one 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'. He is preparing the way for 'the Lord'.

The focus shifts again as the Baptist continues to be the main actor in the story, but Jesus is introduced (vv 9–11). Though Jesus does nothing, the promise of the voice of God that the coming of 'the Lord' is at hand is fulfilled. He is baptised by John, and as he comes up out of the water the heavens open. God enters the story when the firmament that separates heaven from earth splits open: God's Spirit, with which Jesus will baptise, descends upon Jesus from above. A divine voice speaks

directly to Jesus: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (v 11).



Mark next reports that the divine Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness (v 12). Present there for forty days, Jesus is tempted by Satan,

and the angels minister to him. At the end of the prologue Jesus acts: 'he was with the wild beasts' (v 13). The hint of a new creation in verse 1 ('the beginning') returns in verses 12 to 13. In the Genesis story Satan's victory over Adam led to hostility and fear in creation (see Gen 3:14–21; Ps 91:11–13). Mark began the account of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus with a suggestion that this situation has been reversed: he was *with* the wild beasts. Prophetic traditions surrounding the new creation are fulfilled (see Isa 11:6–9; 35:3–10; Ezek 34:23–31). A link with creation themes is also found in the presence of the angels serving Jesus. Repeatedly throughout the desert experience of Israel angels help and guide the wandering people (see Ex 14:19; 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2). During Elijah's experience of hunger and despair in the wilderness, he is served by angels (1 Kings 19:5–7). Although not present

SAMPLE

And just as he was coming  
up out of the water,  
he saw the heavens  
and the Spirit descending  
and a voice came  
from heaven,

in the biblical account, Jewish documents speculate that Adam and Eve were fed by the angels in the Garden of Eden.

Only towards the end of the prologue does the hint of the link with the original creation return, provided by the word 'beginning' of verse 1. Jesus is 'with the wild beasts' and 'waited on' by the angels. His coming restores the original order of God's creation. Jesus has been *presented* to the reader. He is the Christ, the Son of God (v 1), the Lord (v 3) and the more powerful one (v 7), who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (v 8). God's voice has assured us that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and that God is well pleased with him (v 11). He is filled with the Spirit (v 10), and driven into the desert to reverse the tragedy of Adam and Eve, to re-establish God's original design (vv 12–13).

There should be no doubt in the

reader's mind about *who Jesus is*. However, there are hints throughout the prologue that point to a ministry, if he is to baptise with the Holy Spirit (v 8). There is perhaps a hint that he will be sacrificed as God's 'beloved', in a way similar to Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham (v 11; see Gen 22:1–19). Mark wants the reader to arrive at the end of the prologue well informed about *who Jesus is*, but as yet unaware of *how Jesus is the Christ*, the Son of God, the Lord and the Stronger One who baptises with the Holy Spirit, and *how in his person God's original creative design is to be restored*. All early Christians knew that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, and they may well have questioned how such an end could be pleasing to God (see v 11). Mark has written a story that attempts to respond to that question.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Jesus' baptism by John marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry in all four Gospels
- Although based in authentic memories of the life and teaching of Jesus, the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, as we understand the term 'biography' today
- The first verse of Mark's Gospel proclaims that this is not a life story but 'good news' that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God

TORN APART  
LIKE A DOVE ON HIM.  
'YOU ARE MY SON,  
THE BELOVED;  
WITH YOU I AM WELL  
PLEASED.'

