

A CHANGE OF HEART AND MIND

A Meditation on the
Gospel of Mark

Geoffrey Robinson



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Mark 14:32-36: *They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."*

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba,[a] Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

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FOREWORD

As I write, nearly three years have passed since the death of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson on 29 December 2020.

This humble, scholarly, pastoral priest, left behind in my hands two unpublished works – *Towards the end of my days*: theological and spiritual reflections, and *A change of heart and mind*, a meditation on the gospel of Mark.

The former, published in 2022 with much critical acclaim, was the culmination of his scholarship, reflection and experience. Geoffrey was determined to leave no stone unturned in exploring every aspect of a Catholicism faithful to its founder Jesus Christ.

The genesis of this second volume is a series of talks on Mark's Gospel which he gave to teachers in Catholic schools in Sydney for the *Year of Mark* in 1985. Then, some 10 years later he published a book on Mark's Gospel entitled *A Change of Mind and Heart* which, although well received, he felt needed 'radical surgery'. This he completed just before he died.

Geoffrey had a lifelong passion for Mark's Gospel, generally acknowledged as the first, and he was compelled to bring it alive for teachers and students. He felt that despite good religious education curricula, students and ordinary people from all walks of life often didn't really meet or engage with the person of Jesus Christ. They had learnt about him, but not always understood why Jesus or his story might – like it did for so many characters in the gospel – change their lives for good.

Geoffrey's faith was in a person and a story, and only then with the structures that supported them. He was not disloyal to the Catholic Church, but unafraid to critique its excesses and hold it

A Change of Heart and Mind

accountable. In his own words, *the Catholic Church is where I first met Jesus Christ ...*

In this his final work, Geoffrey has designed for his readers a dramatic format which makes the story compelling reading. It is a story of the failure of humanity to accept his message and bring about a 'change of heart and mind'. In Geoffrey's book we are confronted by the failure of the Authorities (Act I), the failure of the Crowd (Act II), the failure of the Disciples (Act III) and the 'failure of his passion and death on the cross' (Acts IV–VI) where even Jesus' friends fail him. The Resurrection then becomes the final Act (VII) wherein the reader – as is Jesus himself with the women having fled in terror – is left alone before the empty tomb, a place 'where all human support falls away, but where human beings can meet God' (Geoffrey's words).

I have named myself the co-ordinating editor of this work. But be in no doubt that the words are those of Geoffrey Robinson. I collaborated with the editor Greg Hill to clarify ambiguities and produce a text easily accessible to the reader. It has been a privilege to take forward to publication these two wonderful books bequeathed to us by Bishop Geoffrey Robinson.

Co-ordinating Editor
Seamus O'Grady
7 November 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In 1984 I was asked to prepare a series of talks for teachers in Catholic schools on Mark's Gospel for the Year of Mark in 1985. I accepted because I was convinced that the future of religious education lay in teachers having a deeper knowledge of the scriptures.

As I studied Mark's Gospel, I found in it a presentation of the person and story of Jesus Christ that moved me profoundly. And for the past thirty-six years this has been at the centre of my spiritual life.

I call what I have written 'a meditation', for while I have studied the works of as many writers as I could find, this book is essentially the fruit of personal thinking and prayer.

Readers must decide for themselves whether I am drawing my ideas out of the text or reading into the text ideas that are not there. They must decide whether the meditation enhances their understanding of Jesus or in some manner diminishes him.

I hope that the book will also enhance the reader's estimation of Mark as a writer. Following the opinion of most modern scholars, I believe that Mark was the first of the disciples of Jesus to write a gospel, so he is the inventor of the gospel form of writing. I believe Matthew and Luke recognised his achievement and freely borrowed from him.

Again, following the opinion of most modern scholars, I believe that Mark probably wrote at a time when the Christian community was being persecuted. We cannot know when he first conceived the idea of writing a gospel or how long he took in his gathering of material, pondering and writing, but I agree with most commentators that he did not complete the gospel until after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE, some forty years or so after the death of Jesus.

I published a book on Mark's Gospel in 1994, under the same name, *A Change of Mind and Heart*, but would now accept that I went into print too early and went too far in my comments. This new book is more than a revision; it is radical surgery, and the new book is less than half the size of the earlier one. It is based on the conviction that, whatever the defects of the earlier book, there was a core to it that had real substance and is worth publishing today. Many people who read the earlier book have supported me in this belief, and I thank them for the encouragement they have given me to proceed with the publication of this new book.

I have changed the title from *Mind and Heart* to *Heart and Mind*, for the change towards Jesus must take place in the heart first before it will be accepted by the mind.

To help in bringing events of 2000 years ago to life in our present-day world, I divide the gospel into Acts, with each Act being a series of Scenes. In this format I think we can all more easily visualise the world of Jesus as viewed through Mark's eyes.

And please note, the Bible version I refer to and quote from throughout is the NRSV – the New Revised Standard Version.

Throughout this book I refer to the imperfect tense because the original almost certainly was written in the imperfect tense.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GOSPEL

It is my contention that Mark has organised the material of his gospel into a drama in seven acts, as detailed below:

Prologue

From out of the Wilderness (1:1–13)

Galilee I

Failure of the Authorities (1:14–3:6)

Galilee II

Failure of the Crowd (3:7–6:6a)

Galilee III

Failure of the Disciples (6:6b–8:21)

The Way

Reaction of Jesus to this Triple Failure: The Journey to Jerusalem (8:22–10:52)

Jerusalem I

The Temple (11:1–13:37)

Jerusalem II

The Passion (14:1–15:47)

Jerusalem III

The Resurrection (16:1–8)

(Epilogue)

From out of the Ultimate Wilderness

THE TITLE OF THE GOSPEL 1:1

The beginning

The ending to this gospel will indicate that everything contained in it is merely the beginning of a story that is still being written today. So the word 'beginning' here indicates both the beginning of the gospel and the fact that the entire gospel is only the beginning of the Good News of Jesus. Since the first words of the Bible itself are 'In the beginning' (Gen 1:1), there is also the suggestion that this gospel will speak of a new day of creation.

of the Good News

The Greek word *euangelion*, usually translated as 'gospel', means 'good news'. The English word 'gospel' is the modern form of the Anglo-Saxon *godspel*, also meaning 'good news'.

of Jesus

The name 'Jesus' was a common one and means 'God is salvation'. Its Hebrew form is '*Jeshua*', an abbreviation of 'Jehoshua' (Joshua).

Christ

The Hebrew *Messiah* = the Greek *Christos* = the English 'Christ'. The meaning of the word is 'The Anointed One', the one over whom perfumed oil has been poured in consecration. Oils had a special use in the coronation of a king and in the dedication of priests, and each of these persons was, as it were, an anointed one, a messiah, a christ. However, the people believed that the day would come when one person would be filled with God's spirit in a special and complete way and that this person would become The Messiah, The Christ, The Anointed One. The story Mark is about to tell is good news because it concerns the coming of this long-awaited Anointed One.

The Son of God.

The title 'son of god' was a title used by a number of kings in ancient times, expressing the special relationship that was thought to exist between the king and the god worshipped by that nation. In this view, the king was appointed by the god and ruled in the god's name, so he was a 'son of god'. The title was sometimes used of the descendants of the royal line of David and is, therefore, not necessarily more than a royal title implying a king of that line. Mark uses the term in a far more literal sense.

When all the parts of the title are taken together, they tell us that what follows will not be a mere factual account of the life of Jesus, but it will expressly set out to tell the 'good news' that Jesus is truly both the promised messiah and the very son of God.

PROLOGUE

FROM OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

1:2–13

SCENE ONE

1. John The Baptist^{er} 1:2–8

Instead of a story of the birth and infancy of Jesus, in this gospel we are given a brief but concentrated presentation of who Jesus was and why he came.

The prologue is deliberately set against the background of a wilderness. The seeming closeness of the heavens in the clear atmosphere of the desert has meant that several major religions have had their origin there. The idea of wilderness was, however, ambivalent, for it was both a place of trial and a place where, away from the distractions of the city, people could meet God¹. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah had all met God in the wilderness.

2. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

Under this heading of Isaiah, Mark combines quotations from the Book of Exodus² and from two prophets, Malachi, and Isaiah. Sacred story had not yet become sacred text, and it was not uncommon for writers to adapt texts in this manner.

1 cf. e.g., Deut 8:14–16; Jer 2:6.

2 Exodus 23:20, “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.”

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

The Book of Malachi foretells the ‘day of the Lord’ and cries out for a sincere religion. In 3:1 it speaks of one who will prepare the way for a greater person who will restore the moral order, and in its last paragraph the book says that Elijah the prophet would return to earth to be the one who would carry out this work of preparation. From his Christian viewpoint, Mark believes that Jesus is that messiah, that greater one, and that John the Baptist is both the one who prepares his way and the fulfilment of the prophecies concerning Elijah.

who will prepare your way,

The word ‘way’ is common to all three texts quoted (Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah) and will become an important word in this gospel.

3. the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

This quotation (Isa 40:3) comes from that section of the Book of Isaiah that speaks of God consoling his people in their exile and slavery and of their journeying back to their homeland. ‘The Lord’ is the translation of the sacred name of God expressed as YHWH, so the one coming would bring the very presence of God into people’s lives. By means of these two brief quotations, Mark has introduced the ideas that the one of whom he writes will bring the presence of God, lead the people back from slavery in exile, and restore the moral order. This technique of allusions to events and ideas of the First Testament was a very common practice and Mark will use it to full effect.

4. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness

The basic sentence at the beginning of this scene is, “As it is written ... John appeared”. Mark refers to John on several occasions³, and

3 1: 6,9,14; 2:18; 6:14–25; 8:28; 11:30, 32.

speaks of him as a highly significant figure, but his interest is solely in the relationship of John to Jesus. The account is brief, stylised, and intent on First Testament references. John carried out his ministry in the wilderness, a place stripped of all human embellishments, such that people had to leave behind their human supports and go out into the wilderness to meet the God who was coming to them through him.

proclaiming

The word used here means ‘to proclaim like a herald’.

a baptism of repentance (*change of heart and mind*) for the forgiveness of sins.

This phrase summarises in a few words the essence of what John proclaimed. The pagan convert who wished to become a member of the religion of Israel had to undergo three things: circumcision, sacrifice offered on that person’s behalf and a bathing in water that symbolised a cleansing from the pollution of past life. The person born into the religion of Israel, on the other hand, did not receive this bathing. What John was doing appears to have been unique, for he was bathing not only pagan converts but those born into the Jewish religion as well. So significant and original was this action that it gave John his popular name and he was known as John ‘the baptiser’ or ‘Baptist’.

Most translations speak of a ‘baptism of repentance’, but the more profound meaning is that of a ‘baptism of change of heart and mind’ (*metanoia*), for a profound change would be essential if people were to accept Jesus. The words ‘into forgiveness of sins’ imply that the bathing gave expression to the people’s desire to put away any evil of their past life and, in this way, it became an effective action leading to the forgiveness of sins by God.

5. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were [being] baptised by him

The two imperfect tenses, indicating things that were continually happening, together with the words 'whole' and 'all', imply a constant stream of people from the entire region, such that, over a period of time, an observer might gain the impression that the whole countryside was on the move. In this one sentence Mark expresses the greatness of the position held by John. He also expresses the restlessness of the people with their spiritual situation, their readiness to go out into the wilderness to meet God, their hunger for the spiritual and longing for a new order. It thus contains the all-important explanation of why the events of this gospel occurred, for it tells us that Jesus was sent by God because of the longing and spiritual hunger of the human race.

in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Mark presents John as carrying out his mission at the Jordan River, though his interest in the river is mainly symbolic, for it was the place where Elijah was said to have been taken up into heaven⁴, and Mark is presenting John as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi concerning the return to earth of Elijah.

6. And John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,

This description of John's clothing reinforces the idea of Elijah returned, for the clothes are the same as those worn by Elijah⁵.

4 2 Kings 2:1-13.

5 2 Kings 2:1-13.

and he ate locusts and wild honey.

This whole verse presents the image of a man of the wilderness areas, living in his own life the ‘change of heart and mind’ he was proclaiming to others.

7. He proclaimed (*was proclaiming*), “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.

The imperfect tense of “was proclaiming” implies a constantly repeated proclamation. The idea of Jesus as the stronger or more powerful one will occur again.

I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

Taking off the sandals and washing feet was the work of a slave. The one coming was so exalted that John did not consider himself worthy even to be his slave.

8. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you

Actually, Jesus will not baptise in this gospel,⁶ and this is one of our first indications that the gospel is only a ‘beginning’.

with the Holy Spirit’.

The word ‘spirit’ is a translation of the Hebrew word *ruah*, which occurs 380 times in the Hebrew version of the First Testament. The first meaning of *ruah* is ‘wind’, the second meaning is ‘breath’, and on most occasions it has one or other of these pragmatic meanings. Despite this, the word also came to have a deeper meaning, for the ‘wind’ can be very powerful and seems to come from nowhere, while ‘breath’ is that on which all human life depends. *Ruah* therefore came to be seen as a mysterious and powerful force that God used for his

6 The Gospel of John does present Jesus as baptising (4:1).

own purposes under the name of the 'spirit of the Lord' or the 'Holy Spirit'.

The first scene refers to great expectations. There was a restlessness and a hunger for the spiritual among the people, and the one of whom Mark writes would comfort them and lead them back from exile into a promised land with the power of the presence of God in their midst. He would restore the moral order, bring forgiveness of sins, and lead the people into the realm of God's Spirit. A change of heart and mind would be necessary, the adopting of a whole new set of values and the turning of one's life in a completely new direction. The prophecy concerning Elijah had been fulfilled in John and The Anointed One himself would now appear.

SCENE TWO

Baptism

1:9–11

9. In those days

These words have a ‘biblical ring’, implying important events.

Jesus came

We are told nothing about the story of Jesus before this moment. We are not told about his birth, his family, his physical appearance, or his personality, for such matters do not serve Mark’s purposes, his sole interest being in religious truths. Without any preamble, ‘Jesus came’, appearing on the scene fully grown and ready for action.

from Nazareth

This is the only biographical detail we are given, and it is not of great assistance to us, for Nazareth is not mentioned in the First Testament and rates only the briefest of mentions in any of the Jewish literature. Its only relevance, therefore, is that Jesus came from an insignificant village. At the same time, describing Jesus through his name and place of origin is a statement that Jesus was a true historical figure in a definite time and place.

of Galilee

The Jews of Jerusalem and Judea saw Galilee as rustic and socially inferior. After the expectations created by the first scene, the appearance of Jesus is deliberately ordinary, for an unknown man from an insignificant village in a socially inferior part of the country quietly joined the crowds approaching John, and the people from Judea would have looked down on the rustic stranger with the

Galilean accent. In this contrast between the vast expectations of the first scene and the very ordinary appearance of Jesus in this scene is the beginning of a theme that will come to dominate this gospel.

and was baptised by John in the Jordan.

The baptism of Jesus caused embarrassment for the early Church, for John's baptism had been one of 'change of heart and mind into forgiveness of sins'. So why did Jesus seek baptism? Matthew will have John arguing with Jesus that he should not baptise him (3:14–15). Luke will pass by the question quickly by placing it in a participial clause (3:21). And the other John will refer to the baptism without actually saying that it took place (1:29–34). Mark alone states it boldly and openly.

This is one of the best attested events in the entire life of Jesus, for most scholars are agreed that the very embarrassment of the other three writers is convincing proof that it actually took place. For Mark, the baptism was the acceptance by Jesus that he was part of and at one with the human race.

10. And just as (*immediately*)

The word "immediately" implies that the acceptance of baptism by Jesus brought an instant response from God, for the moment when Jesus publicly accepted his solidarity with the human race in their spiritual need was the moment God had been waiting for.

he was coming up out of the water

John's baptism was by immersion in flowing water, a washing of the whole person. The 'coming up' of Jesus will be matched by the 'coming down' of the Spirit in the same verse, as the two moved to meet each other.

he saw

It is implied that Jesus alone saw the heavens torn and the spirit coming down. Whether we are to understand this as an actual vision, or as some form of spiritual experience by Jesus, or merely as Mark's method of emphasising the meaning of the baptism, is not a question that Mark either asks or answers.

the heavens torn apart

In the First Testament, when a prophet was sent by God and spoke in God's name, this was sometimes referred to as 'the heavens being torn asunder'. For a long time, however, there had been the lament that God no longer spoke to the people, and the later writers of the First Testament pleaded that it might happen again:

Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.⁷

The heavens were at last being torn open again and in Jesus God would speak to the people once again.

and the Spirit

The gift of the Spirit had long been associated with the Messiah, for it was confidently expected that there would be an outpouring of the Spirit at his coming.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.⁸

7 Isa 64:1.

8 Isa 11:2; cf. 61:1.

descending like a dove on him.

The dove perhaps evokes the Spirit hovering over the waters in the original act of creation, suggesting a new beginning for the human race. These verses are the nearest Mark comes to speaking of the Trinity, and it is to be noted that the Trinity is not presented as far away, but as totally involved in the work of the Son.

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

The literal translation of the Greek is 'in you I was well pleased', suggesting that God's pleasure came at that moment when Jesus freely decided to identify himself with weak humanity by accepting baptism. The central message of the prologue, the major reason for its existence, is that, because of the spiritual hunger of the human race (the first scene), no ordinary messenger, but the very son of God, had been sent into this world (the second scene).

SCENE THREE

Temptation

1:12–13

This third and final scene completes the prologue, and it emphasises the fact that the Son did not come with the trappings of a divine messenger, but he came as one exactly like us.

12. And the Spirit immediately

The accounts of Matthew and Luke contain much more detail concerning the temptation of Jesus, but we must here put this detail out of our minds for we are concerned solely with Mark's presentation of the story. The event follows 'immediately' on that of the baptism and is connected with it. For that event emphasised the divinity of Jesus and his likeness to God, while this event stresses his humanity, his likeness to us.

12. *drove (drives) him out into the wilderness.*

With some interpretations of the text, (The spirit drives him out into the wilderness) this phrase contains the first of 154 unexpected present tense passages in this gospel. In the Greek text they are often jarring and sound as out of place there as they do in English. It would complicate this commentary too much if I tried to comment on each one of them. These present tense texts cannot, however, be simply ignored, as all translations and most commentaries seem to do, for they are as much part of Mark's Gospel as any other literary device.

My own suggestion is that Mark uses this present tense whenever he wishes to stress that something he says is of permanent value and is still happening today. In this verse the present tense could mean that messengers of God are still today being driven out into

the wilderness and tempted and should think very carefully indeed about their goals and priorities. The verb used is quite a strong one. It does not imply violence, but it does imply power in the one casting out, as the same spirit that came down into Jesus at his baptism now immediately cast him out into the wilderness.

13. He was in the wilderness forty days.

As already noted, the wilderness is both a place of trial and a special place for meeting God. The forty days remind us of Moses receiving the covenant on Mount Sinai⁹, of Elijah journeying to meet God¹⁰, and of the forty years the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness.

tempted

The imperfect tense of “he was ... being tempted” implies that the testing continued throughout the forty days. In the verb being used the ideas of trial, tribulation, tempting and testing are all mentioned. The testing signals the first confrontation between Jesus and the power of evil and foreshadows much of the later gospel.

by Satan

The word ‘Satan’ means ‘the adversary’, and it has a long history behind its use. At first it meant any kind of adversary, but later it came to mean an angel of God whose task was to test the virtue of people, and this is how ‘the satan’ appears in the first two chapters of the Book of Job and in chapter three of the Book of the prophet Zechariah. However, a person who accuses people before God will be tempted to exaggerate and fabricate, and ‘the satan’ began to be seen as an evil spirit, Satan. It was a common messianic belief that the Messiah would engage in a battle with Satan and would be God’s

9 “He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights...”, Exodus 34:28.

10 “And he got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God...”, I Kings 19:8.

agent for Satan's overthrow. In this scene Satan is on the attack, tempting and testing the one who has come.

and he was with the wild beasts

Mark's community had been persecuted and some of its members thrown to wild beasts in the arena. Mark assures them that Jesus had been there before them.

and the angels waited (*were waiting*) on him.

In the story of the forty years of the Exodus, angels repeatedly assisted and guided the people of Israel. The imperfect tense implies that the angels waited on him throughout the forty days and, unlike Matthew (4:1-2) and Luke (4:1-2), Mark does not speak of a fast.

With this the prologue comes to an end. Into thirteen verses Mark has managed to place a large amount of material. If there is no infancy story and next to nothing in the way of biographical material, he has still managed to tell us who Jesus is and create the feeling that we can expect much from him. By means of a technique that Mark has borrowed from places such as the Book of Job, we, the readers, have been told the secret of the story and placed in a privileged position in relation to the protagonists, who will have to struggle to understand the things we have already been told.