



**“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34**

Jesus, the Suffering Servant (Part 1)

The four gospels are so important for our Christian faith that it is hard to imagine the church without them. Yet, there was a time when the church existed without these sacred writings. The earthly ministry of Jesus ended in about A.D. 30, and the Gospel According to Mark was probably written in the late 60's. Throughout those decades, the first generation of Christians had the living witness of those who had known Jesus. His sayings and teachings, stories of his miracles, his suffering, death, and resurrection were all told and retold and passed on within the community of disciples.

Before the gospels were written, the church was evangelizing, teaching, baptizing, celebrating Eucharist, serving the poor, and living the teachings of Jesus. Out of this lived experience as the community of Jesus' disciples, the gospels came to be written. The good news of Jesus formed the community of disciples, and this community of disciples formed the written gospels.

We can distinguish three stages in gospel formation. The first stage is the historical life and ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection. This is the good news, the original living gospel. The second stage is the preaching of the apostles. As the Holy Spirit filled their lives, they were enabled to remember the life of Jesus and also to understand its meaning for themselves and others.

This Spirit gave them a burning desire to spread the message of Jesus as the good news of salvation for all. It led them to travel throughout the known world preaching and teaching what they had received. The final stage of formation is the writing of the evangelists. The gospel writers pulled together the collected memories about Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, and the interpretation and understanding of the church into four inspired works.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, each writer expressed the good news of Jesus in his own way. Each gospel was written in a different place in the ancient world, at a different time during the first century, and within the context of different cultures with diverse questions and needs. Each of the four gospels gives us a unique portrait of Jesus to enrich our understanding.

Two main factors led to the need for written gospels. First, the church was rapidly expanding throughout the Roman Empire. This expansion created the need to have some concrete and unchanging expression of the good news of Jesus to bring to each community. Second, the apostles were beginning to die, and the church no longer had their eye-witness testimony of the life of Jesus. The need to pull together the traditions of Jesus' words and deeds into a full picture of his ministry led the authors to create the written gospels.

The best evidence indicates that Mark was the first to shape the Christian message into this unique literary work called a gospel. In fact, Mark is the only New Testament book which calls itself a gospel: "The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The later gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark's gospel as their major source.

When Mark began to write the gospel, the church had already expanded throughout the empire and even to the city of Rome. The best theory about the origins of this gospel places the evangelist in Rome during the reign of Nero (A.D. 54–68). The beauty of that imperial city at the height of its power, its bright marble buildings and its forum filled with nobles and their servants, disguised the terrible suffering of its Christian community. Early sources credit Peter as the source of much of Mark's information and understanding. Mark is known as the "interpreter" or "translator" (*hermeneutes* in Greek) of Peter. When the city of Rome burned in A.D. 64, Nero blamed the Christians and unleashed a great persecution. Both Peter and Paul, along with hundreds of other Christians, died as martyrs during that time. Mark wrote his gospel in this atmosphere of persecution and great suffering, and perhaps it was Peter's death in Rome that spurred Mark to complete his gospel.

Reflection and discussion

- In what sense can we say that Mark's gospel began the third stage in gospel formation?

- What were some of the circumstances that provoked Mark to write this gospel?

A Gospel in a Time of Crisis

The particular portrait of Jesus formed by Mark's gospel responds to the unique situation and challenging questions of the Christian community in which the evangelist wrote. Who is Jesus? Why is he so powerfully attractive and so violently opposed? Why should I continue to follow him? If he has such power, why does he allow us to suffer? How do I follow him in such difficult situations? These were the kinds of questions asked by this persecuted community. These were the questions in Mark's mind as he remembered the deeds of Jesus and drew together his life to hand it on to others. Mark selected the particular parts of the tradition about Jesus that would help the church understand him better and follow him more faithfully.

Mark has written a fast-paced gospel filled with the actions of Jesus. It is the shortest of all the gospels and seems to be designed to create a sense of urgency. Jesus moves somewhat breathlessly from place to place, taking the lead and determining the direction of the narrative. Mark's gospel lacks many of the lengthy teachings that fill the other gospels. Whether or not Mark knew

the stories of Jesus' infancy and early life is up for debate. But Mark told the story only of Jesus' adult ministry, and he regarded this information as sufficient for telling the good news about him.

The ministry of Jesus begins with his proclamation of God's reign: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). The time for the completion of God's plans for the world is upon us. It is an urgent message, demanding a response. "Repent," says Jesus, "and believe in the good news." All the activity of Jesus—his teaching and healing—expresses this pressing and imminent reality. Jesus' testing by Satan, his exorcisms, and his confrontations with hostile opponents emphasize that this is a decisive moment in the struggle against the forces of evil in the world. This proclamation of the kingdom's immediacy requires radical conversion to God, a deep faith in the good news that Jesus brings, and a constant vigilance for the manifestation of the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

The style and emphasis of Mark's gospel corresponds to the situation of crisis in which it was written. The church in Rome was perplexed by failure and suffering. In this context, Mark stressed the suffering of Jesus and wrote a gospel in which everything leads to the passion and cross. He wanted to correct any notion that following Jesus led to a triumphant life. He had to deal with fear and faintheartedness in the community. He emphasized that discipleship means self-denial, that following Jesus means taking up the cross. Mark draws his readers into the crisis of decision that faced Jesus' original audience. If Jesus is who he seems to be, then how will I respond to him?

Mark fashioned his gospel to enable his readers to understand Jesus and to understand discipleship. Though both of these purposes pervade the entire gospel, understanding Jesus is the focus of the first half of the gospel, and understanding discipleship is the focus of the second half. Gradually the gospel reveals the identity of Jesus through his words, through his miracles, through his disciples' insights into his mission, and through the ways they failed to understand him. The gospel also gradually teaches readers about discipleship, through the example of those called by Jesus to follow him and especially through their failures.

A full understanding of Jesus and discipleship cannot occur until the end, until the climax of the gospel in the passion account. The suffering and death of Jesus enables the early Christians and today's readers to answer their fundamental questions. Mark tells us that we cannot know who Jesus is unless we

understand the cross in his life, and we cannot know how to follow him until we accept the necessity of the cross in our lives. If we are to understand the meaning of Jesus' life, we must see Jesus as the suffering Messiah. If we are to truly be his disciples, we must know what it means to take up the cross and follow in his way.

Reflection and discussion

- What are some of the indications that Mark's gospel was written to a community in the midst of crisis?
- What are the questions that I am asking as I prepare to study the gospel of Mark?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God

The first verse of the gospel forms the overarching prologue for the whole work: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The Greek word *euangelion* literally means "good news" or "glad tidings." The old English is *god-spell*, from which we receive the word "gospel." Originally the gospel referred to the good news of redemption offered in Jesus Christ. Paul used the term to refer to the central message of Christianity that he preached and by which believers were being saved. Eventually, in the second century, the word "gospel" was used to denote the unique literary form exemplified by the first-century writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Mark uses the term to refer to everything that follows in this book, the “good news” about Jesus. His work is not just a biography or a book of history, and it is not just a recording of the words and deeds of Jesus. It is a proclamation of good news, of why it is such a wonderful thing that Jesus has come among us to live. The purpose of this gospel is to communicate the life of Jesus in such a way that it becomes good news for those who read it. The gospel gives us not just bare facts, but more importantly, it communicates to us the meaning of Jesus’ life. It is not just an interesting book to be studied; it is an invitation to share life with Jesus. It enables us personally to encounter Jesus Christ as disciples.

This opening verse of Mark’s gospel also gives us the two primary titles of Jesus: he is the Christ (the Greek word is *Christos*, which is translated from the Hebrew word “Messiah”) and he is the Son of God. Mark will draw out the implications of these two titles, Christ and Son of God, throughout the gospel. By the end of the first half of the gospel, Peter is able to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah (8:29). But Jesus can only be proclaimed with full understanding as God’s Son at the end of the gospel, after his suffering and death on the cross (15:39).

One of the most interesting features of Mark’s gospel is the insistence of Jesus that who he is and what he has done be kept secret. He commands his disciples not to reveal his identity as Messiah, and he frequently teaches them in private. He often tells those who receive his healing not to tell others, and he even orders the demons he expels not to make him known.

This command to secrecy seems designed, first of all, to avoid an open confrontation with the Roman authorities. A popular Jewish teacher who drew enthusiastic crowds proclaiming him as the Messiah would certainly be brutally suppressed by the occupying powers. Second, Jesus knew it was expedient to avoid public use of exalted titles because his own understanding of messiahship was so radically different than that of his audience. Jesus was not a revolutionary who would deliver the Jewish people by force from the bondage of Rome. His teaching concerning the arrival of the kingdom of God could be easily misunderstood as a call to arms. For this reason, Jesus often taught his disciples privately, and he taught the crowds the mystery of God’s kingdom in parables. Only at the end of the gospel, after his passion, could the true identity of Jesus be fully proclaimed and understood.

Another reason why Mark emphasizes the command to secrecy throughout his gospel is to highlight the greatness of Jesus and his identity. Despite all attempts to conceal his identity, Jesus is too glorious to be hidden. Those who are healed by Jesus may be told not to proclaim that Jesus healed them, but they cannot help but do so. The demons are silenced, but only after they have confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. The truth about Jesus cannot be contained. Paradoxically, the desire to keep the messianic titles of Jesus secret only emphasizes his glorious character.

Reflection and discussion

- What does the meaning of the word “gospel” tell me about the content and purpose of this writing?

- Why does Mark maintain the element of secrecy about the ministry of Jesus when narrating his gospel?

Transformative Reading of the Gospel

This book explores the first half of Mark’s gospel. In these initial eight chapters of the gospel, we will explore the identity of Jesus through his words and deeds. And we will let the evangelist help us answer the question of Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29). As we study the teachings of Jesus, we see that he possesses a unique authority, unlike that of the scribes and leaders of

Israel. He needs no higher authority to support his teachings. He has authority over the Sabbath, he claims the divine authority to forgive sins, and he maintains that with his coming the kingdom of God has arrived. As we study the deeds of Jesus, we see that he demonstrates how the long-anticipated reign of God has begun in him. His miracles demonstrate that he is Lord and master over the chaotic forces of nature, the demonic world, sickness and disease, and even death.

The gospel also teaches us who Jesus is through the numerous titles used to describe Jesus. The title of “Teacher” is used to portray Jesus not simply as one teacher among many but rather as the supreme and definitive teacher sent from God. This Teacher provides the authoritative interpretation of the ancient Scriptures of Israel. The title “Son of Man” is the most frequent way that Jesus refers to himself: his ministry, his forthcoming suffering and death, and his glorious return as judge of the world. The synonymous titles of “Messiah,” “Son of David,” and “King of the Jews” reveal Jesus as the one whom Israel has long awaited, the one promised by God. The most important titles for Mark’s gospel identify Jesus as the divine Son: “Holy One of God,” “Son of the Most High God,” “Son of the Blessed,” and “Son of God.” This latter is the title through which Jesus is proclaimed by the Father, through which he is supernaturally known by the demonic powers, and through which he is announced to all at his death on the cross.

As you study this gospel, recognize that the purpose of these lessons is both informative and transformative. First, we study in order to learn more about Jesus—to become familiar with his teachings, with the story of his ministry, and how the early church understood his life. And second, we study in order to encounter Jesus and become his disciple. Mark wrote in such a way as to enable us to accomplish both goals. The first objective deepens our understanding of Jesus; the second changes our lives.

Mark invites us to follow the same path that he himself and Jesus’ first disciples followed. By encountering Jesus, growing in our understanding of who he truly is, committing our life to him, and taking up the cross to follow him, we will discover what it really means to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways do both the words and deeds of Jesus in the gospel indicate that the kingdom of God has arrived?

- What are the indications that Mark wants his gospel to transform my life? How can I read in a way that will accomplish that goal?

Prayer

Lord God, you prepared the way for the coming of Jesus your Son. Prepare my heart to encounter him through the pages of this Gospel According to Mark. Stir up within me a deep desire to know and follow Jesus Christ more deeply and personally. Show me how to make my life a witness to the coming of your kingdom into the world. Help me to respond to the invitation of Jesus to come and follow wherever he leads. Keep me faithful these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer which your word offers to me.