

ST MARK THE EVANGELIST

Acts 15. 35-41
Ephesians 4. 7-16
Mark 13. 5-13

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Mark the Evangelist. John Mark, later known simply as Mark, was a Jew by birth. He was the son of that Mary who was the owner of the Cenacle or 'Upper Room' which served as the meeting place for the first Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 12. 12). He was still a youth at the time of our Lord's death; and many think that the description of the young man who was present when Jesus was arrested and who fled from the rabble, leaving behind his 'linen cloth' (Mk 14. 51), was a description of the Second Evangelist himself.

During the years that followed, the rapidly-maturing John Mark witnessed the growth of the infant Church in his mother's Upper Room and became acquainted with its doctrine and traditions. He put this knowledge to excellent use when he compiled his gospel. Later, we find Mark acting as a companion to his cousin Barnabas and Paul on their return journey to Antioch and on their first missionary journey. But Mark was too immature for the hardships of this type of work, and therefore left them at Perga in Pamphylia (or modern Turkey) to return home.

As Barnabas and Paul were preparing for their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take his cousin with him. Paul objected, however. As a result, the two cousins undertook a missionary journey to Cyprus. Time eventually healed the strained relations between Paul and Mark, and during the former's first Roman captivity (61-63 AD), Mark rendered valuable service to Paul (Col 4. 10; Philem 24), and Paul learned to appreciate him. When Paul found himself in chains for a second time, he requested Mark's presence again (2 Tim. 4.11).

An intimate friendship existed between Mark and another disciple, Simon Peter; and Mark played the role of Peter's companion, disciple, and interpreter. According to the early Church Fathers, Mark was present when Peter preached in Rome in 42 AD; and he wrote his gospel under Peter's influence. It is certain that Mark died a martyr's death as bishop of Alexandria in Egypt. His relics were transferred from Alexandria to Venice, where a worthy tomb was erected for him in St. Mark's Cathedral.

The gospel of St Mark, the shortest of the four gospels, is above all a Roman gospel. It was written in Rome in approximately 50 AD and was addressed to Roman Gentile converts, or shall we say, to Western Christianity. One of the high merits of Mark's gospel is its chronological presentation of the life of Christ. It tells us much about the historical sequence of the events in our blessed Saviour's life.

If today we celebrate the feast of St Mark the evangelist, we do well to ask ourselves, 'what is an evangelist?' The mainstream press frequently get completely mixed up about this, confusing a number of different things and speaking of 'evangelicals' when they mean 'evangelist', or 'evangelism' when they mean 'evangelicalism'. The actual root word for 'evangelist' is *euaggelion*, a Greek word meaning 'good news', or 'the good news of the coming of the Messiah'.

The words 'evangelist', 'evangelism' and 'evangelisation' appear in the Scriptures and describe an office or an activity within the Church. Although the Greek word initially meant anyone who preached the good news, in some circles we hear the word 'evangelist' applied *par excellence* to the four authors of the biblical gospels. Today, therefore, we are celebrating the author of one of the four main testimonies to the life of our Lord, as well as pondering what it might mean for us to be 'evangelists' (without having to write any new gospels or join any particular movements).

Most of us like to keep up with the news, do we not? We like hearing, seeing and learning about what has happened in our world. But generally, in order for an event or happening to be considered to be 'news', it has to be significant, and of interest.

Someone said to me recently (and I don't think that their source of information is the sensationalist tabloid newspapers) 'all the news in the world at the moment seems to be bad.' Indeed, Jesus' prophecies in our appointed gospel reading do not sound much like 'good news' either: wars, earthquakes, famines, and universal hatred.

And yet, Mark starts his book with the words 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Mark can write this because he believes that, as Christ says, 'the one who endures to the end will be saved'; and he (like many other apostles) put this radical endurance into practice, eventually dying for his faith in Alexandria.

Mark can practice this endurance even to the end, because even though he believes that 'this is but the beginning of the birth pangs', in the midst of the sorrows and tragedies of this world, something new and wonderful has come. It is the Kingdom of God revealed in his Son. Mark is an evangelist because he announces good news; and the good news is the dawning of the new age of the resurrection: the age of forgiveness and reconciliation with God in Christ; the age of enduring peace and love. Mark proclaims the coming of the Kingdom. It is good news for everyone. This good news became Mark's own life story, and it can become the story of our life, too.

In Mark's gospel, in quite vivid images and stories, we read about how our Lord himself established evangelisation as the very nature and essence of the Church. Jesus gives his disciples the commission to evangelise, that is, to announce the good news 'to all the nations', and to spread the gospel by going forth 'into the world' and to proclaim the gospel to every creature (Mk 13.10, Mk 16.15). This commission is

shared by all Christians. We all have a responsibility to share in the work of proclamation.

Today, Mark and his gospel invite us to ask ourselves, ‘how do we announce the good news?’ We ask ourselves this question not in a rhetorical way, but with a sense of urgency. The sense of urgency comes not just from our care and concern for people we know, whose lives could be changed for the better if they had a relationship with our Lord; but also because we live in a culture that does not support and encourage people to seriously consider the claims of Jesus.

Mark’s gospel was written to bolster the courage of Christ’s followers as they remained faithful witnesses in the face of persecution; and his message is timely for us today. In spite of our current prevailing culture, our testimony can make a difference.

We can, for example, speak very simply to others about what a difference God has made in our lives, if the circumstances and the nature of our relationship with the person allow this. Or we may volunteer to pray for those whom we know to be going through a hard time, or who are suffering. Or we may ask God to show us one or two people who need to see visible and living signs of his love for them; and offer ourselves to show those people that kind of lived-out love.

But let us not forget that many of the people in Mark’s gospel who were touched by our Lord attracted others to him, simply because people *noticed how they were changed by their encounter with Jesus*. Does my life – and does your life – show others how we have been changed by Christ? A life marked by faith expressed in words or in actions has a way of attracting other people to our Lord. That is the work of the ‘New Evangelisation’ that today’s disciples are called to do, following in the path of St Mark. Amen.