

An Interview with Mark, the writer of this Gospel

I have often been fascinated by the author of this Gospel, and longed to meet him and ask a few questions about his Gospel and how he came to write it. Of course I shall have to wait until the next life for such an opportunity, but somehow within what the Church calls the communion of the saints it should be permissible to speculate on some of his answers.

Me: Your work has often been described as a ‘passion narrative with an introduction’. Do you think this is a fair description?

Mark: It may be. I prefer to think of it as a proclamation, a statement of faith for those about to be baptized.

Me: So your work is related to baptism. Is that why you chose to begin with the baptism of Jesus rather than his birth or genealogy?

Mark: My gospel is about the Christian life and how to live it as a follower of Jesus. Information about his birth is irrelevant to that. How does it help my purpose to tell you stories about shepherds and wise men? Others have found that useful to their purpose—it forms no part of my story on discipleship.

Me: Your mention of discipleship reminds me of the poor treatment you gave Peter and the ‘Twelve’. Do you think you’ve been harsh on them, painting them as obdurate, stupid and shortsighted?

Mark: All they lacked was faith. Had they the faith of a grain of mustard seed then mountains would have moved for them. Jesus exhausted himself in trying to build up their faith—the faith we all confess at baptism.

Me: How do you define a disciple?

Mark: A disciple is someone who is ‘with Jesus’. That is, someone who has the heart and mind of Jesus—his outlook and attitude on life—or, as Paul would say, someone incorporated into Christ as part of his body. John too makes the same point: the disciples are to be united in Christ as branches of the vine.

Whether they are living stones, parts of the body or branches of the vine, disciples must be with Jesus—part of his new family. The great danger for the Church both then and now is that so-called disciples soon fall away like some of the seed in the parable of the sower.

Me: Do you think the Church today has a better understanding of what you mean by discipleship?

Mark: No. The Church today is no better than the disciples who, protesting their loyalty to Christ, forsook him and fled. Maybe some of your women are more responsive. Like the women in my Gospel they are more ready to see an opportunity. However, they too stand at a distance noting the demise of the Church and its inability to unite itself to the gospel message, they too are sometimes paralysed by fear.

Me: If your Gospel is a proclamation of faith, then the amount of space you dedicate to the problem of suffering (in the passion predictions and the passion narrative) suggests that you see the good news as related to pain and persecution.

Mark: Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God. When that happens, the forces of evil align their opposition. My gospel is about conflict. It is a conflict between truth and ignorance, between God’s rule and the forces of darkness. The final conflict is played out in the story of the passion. Many of my first readers were undergoing fierce persecution for their beliefs and understood what this means.

Me: Did you come across your material in any connected form, or are you responsible for your own presentation?

Mark: Some of what I deliver was recounted to me in a connected form. The story of the passion is a story with a beginning and an end. Followers of Jesus would tell this tale to each other and I edited it for my own purposes, including material that would illuminate some of the story. The story of the fig tree, for example, has a lot to say about the Jewish rejection of Jesus and its consequences, and similarly the story of the wicked husbandmen. Other stories or sermons would be connected by a theme like a group of conflict stories, or parables, or miracle tales, or sayings on a theme. They get

linked in the oral tradition, as your stories do. Your habit of telling jokes in a pub, for instance, where one joke will be followed by another person telling a similar joke. The stories about Jesus were circulated like that, often with a punchline rather like a joke has.

Me: Are you suggesting there is some humour in your work?

Mark: Of course, black humour, irony, even a little cynicism. For example, it takes a sense of humour for Simon, shaky and vacillating as he is, to be called a 'rock'. There is a mix of anger and humour that makes for a more human presentation of Jesus than you might be expecting.

Me: I notice your presentation of Jesus is much gruffer and more fierce than say that of Luke.

Mark: All of us Evangelists view Jesus from different perspectives. We are like Impressionist painters, we try to capture the vividness of what we see in the '*plein air*'. Or perhaps we are like students in a life class trying to re-create the model from a variety of viewpoints in a mixture of media. Perhaps I am a little more stark and graphic in my presentation.

Me: What is stark about your work is the ending. To finish on a note of fear and failure hardly merits the title 'good news', does it?

Mark: Yes, I have often been criticized for the abrupt ending. Indeed Matthew and Luke did not like it and added material of their own. Luke rather too much for my liking: writing a second volume in which the disciples sound almost too good to be true! However, despite a stupid second-century scribe trying to harmonize my work with that of everyone else, it seems at last the true ending is being recognized even if it is embarrassing.

Me: So you meant it to be uncomfortable and disturbing?

Mark: Of course! There is nothing comfortable or complacent in Christianity as I had to proclaim it. The message of Jesus was almost lost because of stupid disciples, an unresponsive nation and hostile authorities both religious and secular. Even his own family were against him. All he wanted was to fulfil the Father's will. He was driven by God's Spirit to proclaim the kingdom. That kingdom would have been established had the disciples and the nation responded. But no, we were all either out to get him or determined to misunderstand him.

I have to include myself in this condemnation. The postscript I provide in the Garden of Gethsemane is a personal reference. I felt called to follow and was being prepared for baptism but when the going got tough I ran away naked. But I learnt something by being naked. I must forsake everything for the gospel. Take risks—be exposed—be as vulnerable as Jesus was when he was nailed, naked, to the cross. So I wrote my Gospel in an attempt to elicit a response from a Church which was failing Christ yet again.

Me: Why did the women run off, afraid to deliver their message?

Mark: Perhaps because they felt inadequate. Many women, even today, feel they are not up to this task. They are—they must respond even in the face of fierce opposition.

Me: Perhaps they ran off because they were terrified of what discipleship involves.

Mark: I am convinced the Church needs to rediscover the cost of discipleship as well as its rewards. The message is to take up your cross and follow the Son of Man who will be vindicated by God and his saints (Dan. 7). This chapter of Daniel haunts much of what I have to say. The Church today must recover its sense of community. Jesus needed his disciples to be 'with him'. The Son of Man was a corporate figure; in Daniel's vision he, together with the saints, receive the kingdom after a time of great suffering. This imagery stands behind much of what Jesus had to say in my Gospel. The victory over evil can only be secured if true discipleship is understood. The message we have to proclaim is one of a new community prepared to share in Jesus' baptism, drink his cup, and be united with him in establishing God's kingly rule. There is no need to be fearful. Turn around, repent and believe in this good news.¹

¹ McFadyen, P. (1997). *Open Door on Mark: His gospel explored* (121–124). London: Triangle.