**The gospel of Jesus Christ**  29/1/23 dkm

Read: Mark 1, Acts 12:1-19

Text: Mark 1:1

Psalms: 126, 110, 130, 72old

Years ago I bought the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’. I thought news was news, the unbiased reporting of events in our city and nation, and the world. I also believed the ABC logo: ‘Your trusted news source’. I now buy ‘The Australian’ newspaper which gives a different slant, even when reporting the same event. In order to get close to the truth I listen to more than the ABC! With the advent of social media, we have to be even more discriminating in what we read, and avoid what Trump calls ‘fake news’.

You may wonder why we have four books in the Bible reporting the same events, namely the life and death of Jesus. We know each of these to be the inspired word of God, but it means sceptics have four independent accounts that agree, making it hard to refute what is written. The first three of these books or gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are called the ‘synoptic gospels’ because they ‘see together’. They may not be completely independent - no writer ignores what others have written- but each have their own nuances in content, language, and style.

While Matthew was an apostle, Mark was not, nor was Luke. Luke tells us that he investigated reports and got eyewitness accounts before writing his gospel. Mark spent a lot of time with the apostle Peter, who was an eyewitness of course, and who preached the gospel of repentance and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, beginning at Pentecost. Mark is called ‘Peter’s interpreter’ by the church fathers- we might call him ‘Peter’s communicator’. Peter actually calls Mark ‘my son’ in his first letter, written from ‘Babylon’, meaning Rome (1Peter 5:13).

**1. Who was Mark?**

From the earliest times this gospel has been attributed to Mark and no other. Mark is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 12:12 as ‘John whose surname was Mark’, the son of Mary- this Mary was different to all other Mary’s in the Bible. She appears to have been well-off, owning a large home in Jerusalem, and having a servant called Rhoda. It was to Mary’s house that Peter fled after his miraculous escape from Herod’s prison, and it was probably Mary’s house that had the large upper room. The young man who fled naked from the temple police after following Jesus to Gethsemane was probably Mark himself (Mark 14:51,52). Mark was young but he was involved in the life of the apostles both before and after the death and resurrection of Jesus; their preaching and their persecution.

When Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from Jerusalem they took John Mark with them (Acts 12:25). They then took him as their assistant on their first missionary journey to Cyprus (Acts 13:5). For some reason, unknown to us, Mark left this mission when Paul and Barnabas crossed over the mainland at Pamphylia (Acts 13:13, 15:38). Paul did not accept Mark’s reason for leaving and refused to take him on his second journey. It seems Barnabas did accept Mark’s reason for leaving. The disagreement between these two senior missionaries was so sharp that they parted ways. We should note that Mark and Barnabas were cousins (Col 4:10).

So Barnabas and Mark set off for Cyprus and we hear no more of them because the record in Acts follows Paul and Silas north to Cilicia. Mark’s next appearance in the Biblical record is in Rome, where Paul, who was in prison, accepts help from Mark (Col 4:10, Philemon 24). In Paul’s last letter from Rome he asks for Mark to come, ‘because he is useful for my ministry’ (2Tim 4:11) - so they were reconciled in the end. Also in Rome at that time was Peter (1Peter 5:13). Peter was martyred during the latter part of Nero’s reign in c.AD 67.

**2. When, where and why?**

Mark’s gospel is widely regarded as the first of the four gospels to be written. We note that it is considerably shorter than Matthew or Luke. He tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus or his genealogy. Not that the incarnation was not important for him; he declares Jesus to be the Son of God in verse 1, and says that a voice from heaven declared him to be God’s Son in verse 11. Besides, the works of Jesus prove this to be true. If Mark was writing to Romans or Gentiles, as appears to be the case, the genealogy of Jesus was not so important.

Mark includes only two quotes from the OT in this gospel. At the outset he shows that what the prophets spoke about Messiah came true in Jesus, the Christ or anointed one; Messiah was fundamental to Jewish teaching. By showing Jesus to be the anointed of God meant he was King, a King to rival the brutal power of Caesar. Jesus comes announcing ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ (1:15). Gentile believers in Rome, and Jewish believers, would have been comforted by this truth. Further indication of his writing to a Gentile audience includes his explaining of Jewish customs and words and use of Latin technical terms.

When we say Mark was the earliest gospel to be written, we suggest he wrote before AD 67 and certainly before AD 70. The Romans attacked and destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Peter was martyred, so it is believed, in AD 67, towards the end of Nero’s reign. Nero started attacking the Christians after the great fire of Rome in AD 64; he blamed them of being behind this fire, thereby shifting blame from himself. Some scholars think Mark wrote after Peter’s death and others say before. Some even date this gospel as early as AD 50 but most put it in the 60’s. Even so, it is very early, just thirty or so years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have already pointed to widespread agreement that he wrote from Rome.

Mark wrote this gospel as a record of the works and words of Jesus of Nazareth, and especially his death and resurrection. The last three of the sixteen chapters refer to events following the arrest of Jesus. Mark focusses on the facts, but explains the events within the context of the gospel of Jesus Christ when necessary. He presents Jesus as fully human, eating and sleeping and even being a carpenter by trade. He grew up in a family with brothers and sisters (6:3). The historical existence of a person from Nazareth called Jesus was not questioned.

But Jesus was also divine, being the Son of God. Mark declares this fact from the outset (1:1) and proves it by reference to numerous miracles, showing how Jesus drove out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Jesus demonstrated authority over demons, disease and death. Such authority far exceeded that of any human king, even Nero, and amazed all saw Jesus. Great crowds followed Jesus whenever he went, but he wanted them to see beyond his works to his person. He prepared the people for his rejection and death on the cross; as the Son of Man and Son of God he would ‘give his life a ransom for many’ (10:45).

In the back of my Bible are some pages entitled, ‘Harmony of the gospels’; I once had a book with the same title. It is interesting to compare the records of the three synoptic gospels in particular; you can of course, do this by reading them together. Mark, as we have said, leaves out or summarises long discourses but records most miracles and parables. He includes a miracle not found in the other gospels in chapter 8:22-26. Many people, myself included, go to Luke or Matthew before we go to Mark, but being the earliest of the gospels we must read Mark; in doing so we will find a succinct and vivid account of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**3. Prologue**

In preparing a sermon I find the opening and closing words most challenging, although by the time I reaching the close the words seems to flow, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Mark had the Spirit inspiring the words he wrote of course, so his opening words are most interesting and inspiring. Mark does not begin with a genealogy like Matthew, or an explanation of his research methods like Luke. Mark’s prologue is more like John’s in that he takes us straight to the heart of his message; he even uses the word ‘beginning’ like John, but in a different sense; ‘the beginning, rather than ‘in the beginning’.

Verse 1 is like a title, but it does link with the next verse ‘as it is written’. The word ‘beginning’ refers to time or source. It takes us back to the beginning, which according to Genesis 1:1 is the time before creation. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism have little or no sense of time or history, but the gospel of Jesus Christ does. And if there is a beginning there is an end, except with God who is infinite and eternal. What Mark is writing is not the end but the beginning of something unique and wonderful in world history, and for all the world. In a sense he gets to the end of the gospel with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, but with Jesus still being alive the gospel continues.

‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’, good news for the whole world. This good news is for the world lost in sin. If Mark was in Rome during Nero’s pogrom against the Christians there was little good news in their lives. There is little by way of good news in the lives of many in the world today. People are suffering because of the sin of others or because of their own sin. Headlines declaring, ‘The good news of Jesus Christ’ would be a wonderful change to the headlines we read and hear. I hope you rejoice in this good news, and are telling this good news to the world, beginning in your own backyard.

The good news is not that of a wedding, or the birth of a baby, or a world cup or the inauguration of a new president or king- although Jews is the promised King of the Jews. Jesus Christ is the good news, the fulfilment of the Lord’s promise to save us from our sins. The name given to Jesus at his birth was Jesus, because ‘he will save his people from their sins’ (Matt 1:21). He is Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter and son of Mary (6:3). Jesus is fully man; he is the Son of Man. He is given the title Christ or Messiah meaning ‘anointed one’. The Jewish religion proclaimed the coming Messiah; they looked to another anointed king like David. Persecuted Christians in Rome would have had little respect for their king or emperor, but in King Jesus Mark proclaims a different sort of king, one who is all- powerful but also loving and forgiving of sin, one who died but rose again on the third day.

A highlight and indeed climax of Mark’s gospel is Peter’s confession, ‘You are the Christ’ (8:29). Peter said this after seeing the mighty works of Jesus before his death and resurrection. It was a Roman centurion who, watching Jesus die on the cross, declared, ‘Truly, this man was the Son of God’ (15:39) - Peter had the fled the scene at this time!

The name ‘Jesus’ reminds us the humanity of Jesus, and the title ‘Christ’ of exalted humanity, the anointed of God. The title ‘Son of God’ which Mark introduces right here in verse 1, leaves us in no doubt as to the divinity of Jesus, the subject and focus of this gospel. I was once told not to use Mark’s gospel when speaking to a Muslim because of this title given to Jesus; they regard Jesus as a prophet but in no way divine. Son of God points unmistakeably to the divinity of Jesus. We should probably be like Mark and get these truths about Jesus on the table from the very start.

Mark’s gospel is good when speaking to Hindus also, to people like Ghandi, who latch onto the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount but reject his divinity. In speaking to Jehovah Witnesses and other Trinity- denying groups, you could start with John’s gospel which opens with the words, ‘In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God’ (John 1:1). They will tell you from their corrupted Bible that it is, ‘the word was a god’.

Mark it seems knew the importance of beginnings. We need to pray when we prepare to speak to someone about Jesus. Using the words of the Bible is the best way, providing we know and understand these words. And we need to keep the focus on Jesus and not get sidelined into comparing Jesus and other so-called prophets or gurus. Jesus Christ is the only name given under heaven among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).