

Commissioning (1:3-15)

- The first eight chapters of Mark are about reaching out (mission), being taken on a journey. John Proctor likens it to driving along a sunny road before driving into a dark tunnel (8:27-15:47) but knowing, though, there will be a dot of light and new life at its end (16:1-8).
- John the Baptist roots the gospel in the OT (1:2f) but looks forward. He is forerunner and road maker for Jesus. As John says repent (1:4) so Jesus will too (1:15). John's 'one more powerful than I' will bring the Spirit afresh to Israel (1:7f).
- At his baptism Jesus receives the Spirit he will share (1:10) and is assured of his identity as God's son (1:11). A period in the wilderness will test his relationship with the Father (1:12f) and it is only after John is arrested that Jesus begins his ministry of proclaiming the 'good news' (1:14-15).

Calling his disciples (1:16 - 3:6)

- Jesus calls the twelve (1:16-20, 3:13-19) who are to follow the road with him. Each time Jesus speaks of his death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33f) he explains to them what it will mean for their lives and commitment. Mark does not always present a particularly flattering picture of the disciples – they find Jesus's teaching and example hard to follow (8:33; 9:32) and argue about 'greatness' (9:33f). They sometimes seem detached (10:32), want to be selective in the healing (9:38) and have great ambitions about power and glory after his passion (10:33-40).
- Not all negative – they make a big commitment to follow Jesus (1:16-20, 2:13f). God will honour what they have done ((10:28-31) and Jesus will use them to spread the news of the Kingdom (6:7-13, 30, 41; 8:6). They will be entrusted with a different and special pattern of living (10:42-45) and after the resurrection Jesus will be the 'shepherd' going ahead to meet them (14:27f; 16:7).
- This teaching to the twelve will extend to all who follow Jesus, so Mark uses phrases such as: 'if any' (8:34, 9:42), 'those who' (8:35, 38), 'whoever' (9:35, 37, 40f), 'whoever' (10:15, 43f).

Foe as well as followers

- Once the journey and mission begin the healings and exorcisms come quickly with Mark providing summaries (1:33f, 39; 3:7-12). Mark shows how people respond and how Jesus attracts attention (1:45; 2:2; 3:8). Jesus teaches with authority (1:22), carries out exorcisms (1:27), heals (1:34), deals with sin (2:10) and crosses 'legal' boundaries (2:18-28).
- His actions and teachings disturb people (it is 'not as the scribes' (1:22)) and following a series of controversies in ch.2 and 3, we are told Pharisees and Herodians plot to

destroy him (3:6). We are already being given signposts to the cross in 'bridegrooms' taken away and lost 'wine' (2:20, 22).

'To be a Christian disciple is therefore to identify as a follower of Jesus and seek to model his character in all of life, not just to adhere intellectually to Christianity as a set of beliefs.'

From: 'Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England.'
<https://cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/CUF-GRACE-Report-2020.pdf>

Gathering and dividing (3:7 - 6:6)

- The healings and exorcism draw people from all round (3:7-12) but his 'power' is neither universally welcomed nor understood (3:20-22). Is he mad? (3:21). His power to bind the 'strong man' comes not from evil but because he has already 'faced and overcome the power of the prince of evil' (Proctor, 1:13). He speaks of a house and kingdom divided (3:24f) and draws a new 'family' of followers to himself from which even his own family may be excluded (3:31-35).
- The teaching is expanded in the parable of the sower (4:1-20), the lamp on a lampstand (4:21-25) and the scattered seed (4:26-29). The message is received in different ways, yet truth will come to light and there is hope for the harvest. The kingdom may seem tiny, but it will grow and be refuge for many (4:30-32).
- The 'gathering' and 'division' continue into ch.5 and 6. His actions on the sea raise questions and bring unease and amazement (4:35-41; 5:1-20). He heals outside (5:24-34) and inside Israel (5:1-20) and faith makes people well (5:34,36f). He is asked to leave some places (5:17) and finds little faith in others (6:1-6). Controversy reigns!

The coming menace (6:7 - 8:26)

- In this remaining section the mission continues as the disciples are sent out on their own (6:7-13). He is not John the Baptist, but John's death is prophetic of Jesus's own death to come (6:14-29). He is the 'shepherd' who feeds his flock (6:34-44).
- In ch.7 the controversy continues over 'food laws' (7:1-23) and throughout this chapter and the beginning of the next Jesus will reach out across boundaries to Gentiles – a Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30), a deaf man in the Decapolis (7:31-37) and again meeting the needs of a crowd (8:1-10). Jesus warns the disciples to be aware of the Pharisees and Herodians (8:15). Still the disciples do not 'see' (8:21) - illustrated in the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida (8:22-26) – the disciples will understand a bit at a time.

Lord God, give us grace to see afresh the nature and calling of Jesus, to rediscover in the Scriptures the essential identity of the messiah. As we commit ourselves to follow him, help us to be courageous in intent and patient in expectation.... of ourselves and of those who travel with us in his company. Amen.

Nick Baines, 'Marking Time: 47 Reflections on Mark's Gospel for Lent, Holy Week and Easter' (St Andrew Press, 2005). Thursday in Lent 4