

Jesus in Mark

When he said that atheism is a useful challenge to the things that Christians believe, Rowan Williams – Archbishop of Canterbury at the time – caused quite a stir. What he meant was that when people ask hard questions of us, we are forced to face up to the things we haven't thought about properly in our own faith.

Yet it is very interesting that even atheists tell stories to help them understand the world around them. We call such stories myths, but the word 'myth' does not mean that the story has no truth in it, merely that the story points us to realities that can't be summed up in words or by science.

When we talk together about the gospels, it is easy to assume that we're all talking about the same thing, the same story, but experience suggests that we all learn different things about Jesus in different ways, and so the danger in devoting a series of addresses to studying Jesus in the gospels is that you will start to think I believe in a different Jesus from the one you believe in, or – even more upsetting (and not true) – that I may not believe in Jesus at all.

Study and scholarship has shown us that the gospels were written down by radically different authors, using sometimes varying sources, and writing to help very varied audiences come to know the Jesus whom the apostles themselves knew. So, although there is only one Jesus, we find four different pictures of him in the four gospels, and we all make our own pictures too, which interestingly means that there could be millions of Jesus's if all our pictures were entirely true.

The sheer number and variety of different accounts of Jesus which make it into the written gospels bears witness to the real and living experience of Jesus among his early followers, and this I find to be a very inspiring thing. On one level, the gospels work like a myth, because they use words and stories to reveal to us a reality that goes beyond words. But it is clear to me that there is a real person and a real life at the centre of it all, and that person is Jesus.

In no one of the four gospels is Jesus more plainly and honestly presented to us than in the gospel of Mark. This is mainly because – as we shall see – Mark does not try to 'gild the lily' or add explanations for the puzzling aspects of the story. Nor is he afraid to leave us to work out for ourselves things that he himself cannot tell us to be a clear fact. If we accept the view of the early Church that Mark was a disciple and interpreter for Peter, the apostles' leader, then we can understand, from the rough-and-ready nature all four gospels reveal when writing about Peter, that Mark's gospel would be an attempt to put together in a sensible order the reminiscences of his master about the Master of all. Peter tells Mark

what he remembers about Jesus; Mark writes it down so that it can make some sense to the reader or hearer.

What I want to do in this address is to try and tease out what is distinctive – what is special – about Mark's presentation of Jesus. And there is no better place to start than with the first words of Jesus reported by Mark (1.15) *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.* Just as we do in our worship today, the early Christians seem to have used memorable phrases like this to express what they were about. This serves as both a stimulus to prayer and a statement of belief. In the very first verse of his gospel, Mark has described his book as the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. He means that through the book Jesus becomes alive and real to the reader in an almost sacramental way. The way Mark uses such thoughtful and prayerful phrases at key points in his book suggests a call to know Jesus through prayer, remembrance, and re-presentation.

The idea that in Jesus the *time is fulfilled* would have resonated with observant Jews of the time. For some centuries both mainstream groups and sects in Israel had expected the coming of one who was characterised by various titles including that of Messiah (Anointed One) and Son of Man. In the same way, they longed for a time when God would again be the King and Liberator of God's people. Jesus identifies himself as the initiator of this kingdom, the successor to the line of prophets culminating in John the Baptist. Looking at it, as Mark does, with hindsight, we can see Jesus as the hinge between two ages, because he then tells us what the key to this kingdom is – repentance and belief in the good news. We know this, but those listening to Jesus don't. Earlier in chapter 1, Mark has told us of Jesus's baptism by John, and the words of the Father *You are my beloved Son* (1.10-11) but it is only Jesus who sees and hears, not the others who are present.

Up until the middle of his gospel (chapter 8 verse 33), Mark goes on to tell us the way that Jesus lives, and how he taught his disciples to understand who he was. But one thing that students of Mark's gospel have noticed is the way in which Jesus tries to conceal from the *general public* who he really is. This is generally described as the 'Messianic Secret'. Mark tells *us* from the start who Jesus really was, but he makes it clear that Jesus did not want people to know this during his ministry. In 4.34-35 we hear how *Jesus did not speak to [the crowds] except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.* He tells the twelve (4.11) *to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.* He tells the healed leper (1.44) *See that you say nothing to anyone.* And yet, even though he teaches his disciples carefully, he becomes frustrated because they don't understand (8.17) *Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?* Which are exactly the words he uses earlier for those outside for whom everything comes in parables.

The Messianic Secret suggests two things we have to understand both about Jesus and about the early Church. Mark is at pains to present Jesus not as a teacher ushering in the Kingdom of God, nor yet the one who divinely opens the Kingdom of God, but Mark wants us to see that Jesus has in himself God's Kingdom, and we share in that Kingdom by knowing him. Jesus first prepares his close followers to see God's Kingdom in him, then – when he has himself completed his purpose in this life – he expects the same followers to bring the Kingdom to the world – to teach the world to know Jesus not through parables but in person. As it was in him, so the Kingdom is to be in us.

The second half of Mark's gospel moves from the teaching and miracles of Jesus to focus on Jesus as the Son of Man, and the progressive misunderstanding of his followers – and the hostility of the religious authorities. In 8.27-33 Jesus is for the first time recognised (by Peter, Mark's teacher) for who he really is. This forms a sort of turning point, for the disciples have at last come to understand that Jesus is the hoped-for Messiah, but now Jesus has to help them to see what sort of Messiah he really is – the suffering Son of Man.

The idea of the Son of Man, and the servant who suffers, would have been familiar to any observant Jew of the time, but it seems that his disciples were as unwilling as we are today to take the radical teaching of Jesus seriously. The prophets had dared suggest that 'one like a Son of Man' (Daniel 7.13) would be part of the divine fulfilment of the world, and the second part of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (Is 40-54) presents a lengthy four-part teaching on the way in which the true Servant of God must suffer. It seems that Jesus takes both of these teachings seriously in a way that no one else is prepared to. Three times (8.31-32a; 9.30-31; 10.32-34) Jesus predicts the passion, and three times he is misunderstood. The disciples seem unable either to accept his suffering or to embrace the profound humility that lies at the very core of the ministry and future of Jesus.

Only finally in the most radical way of all – by living out this humility and suffering – is Jesus able to get the disciples to see what he means. It is through the Passion and Cross that they come to understand, but notice that for Mark it is the very death of Jesus that lets the cat out of the bag, for it is a Roman centurion, a pagan intruder, who recognises him as the Son of God (15.39): *Truly this man was God's Son!* Those who should have known and understood, the religious authorities, ask him if he will reveal himself as the Messiah (14.61-62) and, having condemned him for saying that he is, mock him on the Cross (15.32). The disciples, for the most part, slip away out of trouble. But by suffering and offering the whole of his human existence, Jesus has made the final emphatic statement that he really is the Messiah, the Son of God, as Mark has set out to show us through his gospel.

So Mark has shown us how Jesus has revealed to his disciples – and to us, if we want to be to be his disciples – how he is the Messiah, the Son of God, who lives out his divinity by suffering as the Son of

Man. Neat as Mark's gospel is, though, there is, as it were, a sting in the tail. For the text of Mark, as we have it, ends very abruptly. Chapter 16 narrates the arrival of the women at the empty tomb, the assertion by the young man in the white robe that Jesus has been raised, and the instruction: *Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.* And then the women run from the tomb, and the gospel ends with the phrase: *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.* Of course, not every source for the text of Mark's gospel ends here, but all three of the endings that exist are written in styles very different from that of Mark, and they have obviously been added later by other people who find Mark's ending too abrupt, or on the assumption that he must have ended his gospel with some sort of description of the spread of the resurrection news, and that this has been lost.

I'd like to ask, however, why Mark should not have ended his gospel that way. If we accept his clear aim to help us to share in the mystery of the life of Jesus – and his saving work – by learning the same things that Jesus taught his disciples, then surely we do not need anything more. In fact, for Mark, as for his master Peter, and also for us, the only really important thing is to know Jesus. This will not only inspire us, and challenge us in the small and great aspects of his teaching and work, it will also make us justly afraid, for we are always looking for that little bit more. We want explanations and doctrines to help us feel we know what to think and believe. We want to know what happened to the disciples after the resurrection, and we certainly don't want to know that they were afraid of what happened when Jesus was raised.

The abrupt ending of Mark is actually the place where our story meets with the story of Jesus. Mark, I think, is cleverly allowing us to realise the way in which through entering into the mystery of his gospel we are now in the same place as Peter, the women, and the other disciples. We too are meant to be afraid, and we too are meant to realise that living, dying and being raised with Jesus is the only thing that matters to us. There *is* no other in whom we can finally trust, and there *is* no other with whom we can walk in life, whose humility we must imitate, whose suffering we must expect to undergo, and in whose eternal life we shall share, through the witness of those like Peter and Mark who themselves have come to know the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

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