



## **Sunday Evening Service Preaching Series**

**Westminster Chapel**



## **Introducing Mark**

Our intent is to become an increasingly more Gospel-centred church that helps people to encounter and experience the presence and power of Jesus Christ, so that they may come to believe in and know God personally. This will find an accelerating, vital and significant outlet in our strong, biblical, and anointed preaching. This is one reason why we intend to focus on the Gospel of Mark for many months to come, as a primary means to help believers and seekers alike to meet Jesus in fresh, experiential, and life-transforming ways.

This sermon series will rally both our pastoral leaders and other invited guest preachers into the task of bringing engaging and powerful messages on this, the earliest of the four Christian Gospels. This enormous task will draw upon all of our powers of mind, imagination, emotion, and spirit, as we seek to let Scriptures speak. This will involve serious sustained meditation upon scripture, as well as the study of selected biblical commentaries and other aids. It will call upon our greatest skills in shaping the kind of preaching and communication that connects with people's lives today. We need the anointing, insight, and power that only the Holy Spirit can give in order to do justice to this awesome task of 'preaching Christ and him crucified'.

I am so pleased that some of our men have expressed their willingness and enthusiasm to join us in unfolding this remarkable work, The Gospel According to Mark. I don't believe any of us will be disappointed or jaded as we engage with this sustained focus upon Christ's words and deeds as we unfold the details of his coming and mission to this world. Our aim in studying Mark is to help people to see Christ as God's Servant King, and Saving Messiah, so that we will want to surrender our lives to him and align fully with his Kingdom rule.

### **Before Mark picked up his pen, no one had ever written a Gospel before**

It may surprise you, but this is an entirely new genre of literature in world history. Yet, it soon became a form of writing that not only motivated the writing of three other new canonical Gospels, (Matthew, Luke and John), but also their cheap imitations in the form of many later Gnostic and fictional heretical ones! This genre of writing a true 'Gospel' (as opposed to the unauthorised non-apostolic and apocryphal fakes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries), witnesses to the enduring power of this new literary form. Mark epitomises the foundational and formative influence of all four of the NT Gospels upon Christian conversion and the Christian life. This was a new Holy Spirit inspired literary form, as well as a Spirit-inspired collection of God's very own words. Story telling is a vital ingredient of the Bible as a whole. Stories help define our world view, aiding us to see all of reality more accurately,

and to create a fresh world of presuppositions, assumptions and relations that we are not only invited to enter ourselves, but which can help others to inhabit this new world also. We call this 'evangelism'.

It's also important that we realise that these stories are true, in that they describe reality as God defines it to be, and are not simply some novel form of 'pious' fiction (with the emphasis on 'novel'). Only on the basis of this reliable conviction can we enter the world of God's creation, salvation and blessing and find solutions that address our needy lives. The Gospels bring to matured completion centuries of Israel's inspired story-telling in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. We are all invited to participate fully now, Jews and Gentiles, because we can now discover that the goal of the Old Testament has been reached, God's work has been accomplished completely, the Messiah has come, salvation is won. The power is now available to shift us from being mere spectators of what God did in the past, to become participants in what he is doing right now in the present.

### **A Gospel written by real people, about real events, for real people like us**

From our earliest age, stories have the power to bring out the child-like imagination in us, and still do. They evoke wonder, expectancy, response and delight. They take us out of our often flat, two-dimensional world of secular philosophy and pseudo-science's reduced 'spin' on reality, into God's supernaturally created, sustained, and divinely invaded 'take' on the world. This brings us back to reality, and back to life's intended sense of wonder. This is surely something of what Mark had in mind in writing as he did. He describes at length some unusual, controversial and amazing things that happened around Jesus in a thin slice of ancient history that Mark was in a big hurry to record! He basically tells us what kind of things would happen 'If God was one of us'. And this is all important, simply because that's what God became – authentically human in Jesus Christ!

Mark's selectivity and brevity means that this is no ordinary 'biography' like those we are familiar with today, often running to hundreds or thousands of pages. Even a very slow reader could finish it in just a couple of hours. Mark teaches us virtually nothing about the Jesus our 'celebrity-seeking' culture clamours to know. We have no idea about Jesus' appearance, size, weight, features, origins, ancestry, childhood, education, hobbies or family. We discover little here about his emotions, inner struggles, favourite people, party-political preferences, romantic feelings, books he read, or what he thought of Rome (well, not much anyway)! Yet, it would be true to say that this 'simple' Gospel has continuously changed people's thinking about all of those things, and many more, ever since it was written. It's a Gospel about real events, for real people, living in the real world. This includes the

sick, the hungry, the abused, the demented, the outsiders, the religious, the non-religious, the weak and the people in power.

### **How did this strange document come into being?**

In the early church both PAPIAS (Bishop of Hierapolis, c. 120 AD), and EUSEBIUS (Church Historian, Caesarea, 260-340 AD), confidently attributed this Gospel to John Mark, heir of a propertied and comparatively wealthy Jerusalem family. Mark had a Hebrew name – Johannes ('Let God show grace'), and a Latin name - Markus. This reveals a cosmopolitan outlook on the part of his parents, and predictive of Mark's wide sympathies for all people. Mark was a mere youth during the time of Christ's earthly ministry, and a resident in Jerusalem where his parents seem to have befriended and given hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. He was later befriended by both the apostles Barnabas his large-hearted older cousin, and Paul the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 12:25), who subsequently took him on their first church planting mission, initiated by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:4-5). With God's help and the powerful anointing of the Holy Spirit, this team saw the founding of several new Christian congregations in Galatia, in the area we now call southern Turkey (see Acts 13:6-14:28).

Trouble arose among these churches soon after the departure of Paul's apostolic team, as 'Judaizers' (proselytisers to Jewish faith and religion from Jerusalem) infiltrated these new churches, then caused controversy among the apostles' vulnerable Gentile converts. They insisted that Gentiles had to be circumcised and become Jews first, before they could be counted as true followers of the Messiah. Amid hardship and difficulties on their return visit to settle these disputes, after the matter had been thoroughly debated and resolved at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul and his team settled the dispute permanently by reporting the Council's firm decision that Gentiles should be admitted to the Church without the need to become Jews, or submit to detailed Torah obedience.

But John Mark's youth and unfamiliarity with hardship led to his decision to drop out of this mission since he was desperate to return home prematurely, in effect deserting his friends in Pamphylia, much to Paul's disgust (Acts 15:36-38). This led to a rift between Paul and Barnabas, as they argued about how to react to Mark's inconsistency (Acts 15:39-40). Paul was for 'firing' him permanently. But Barnabas remained loyal and supportive to his young ward John Mark, partly because they were in fact cousins (Col. 4:10), and Barnabas was by name an 'encourager'. Paul and Barnabas parted their ways. But Barnabas' good will paid off eventually, with lasting good results in Mark's life over time, so that even Paul revised his opinion of Mark to that of a much more positive assessment of him (see II Tim. 4:11)!

It appears that some years after this early missional period, Mark also became a close friend and companion of the Apostle Peter, travelling with Peter on his

apostolic missions, and particularly his later westward visit to Rome itself. Here, early authorities like Papias and Eusebius tell us that he became a close companion to Peter, then an eyewitness and recorder of Peter's vivid preaching and first-hand reminiscences of Jesus and his earthly ministry, miracles, and final sufferings. Papias notes four things about Mark that define his role as (1) A writer or amanuensis for Peter (2) Who recalled and wrote accurately the content of Peter's spontaneous preaching to act as a permanent record (3) That Mark was not one of the original disciples (4) But that he desired not to omit or misrepresent anything i.e. that Mark valued historic fact and precise truthfulness in writing in the way that he did.

We have no reason to doubt the historical reliability of Papias' accuracy in reporting these facts about the origins of Mark's Gospel. We may rightly hold solid convictions concerning this book, convictions that will undergird our preaching from it:

- This gospel has the reliable apostolic authority and endorsement of the Apostle Peter himself, vouching for the truth of its contents.
- It is painfully honest about Peter's failings, and those of the other Apostles, a fact that adds to our trust in Mark's integrity, honesty and reliability.
- It contains no self-display or praise of Peter (the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do!), further testimony to the living voice of Peter himself acting as the major source of Mark's record, and a witness to both Peter's humility and Mark's candid reporting.
- So close were the Apostle Peter and John Mark, that the former came to regard the latter as his 'son' (I Pet. 5:13), further endorsement of their close partnership in producing this Gospel, thus allowing Peter's apostolic voice to echo throughout all time.

### **Some other important things you need to know**

Other vital information that will help you concerns the Gospel's date, theme, style, and distinctive features, including its structure.

#### **Date**

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This Gospel was written in Rome somewhere around the mid to late 50's or early 60's AD, since it's obvious that Luke depends on it as a source. *Eusebius* suggests Peter was in Rome during Claudius reign, around 54 AD. The Roman believers asked Mark to come too, and make a record of Peter's witness. Clement of

Alexandria (155-220 AD) says that Mark's Gospel had Peter's approval and affirmation – authorising it to be read to the church i.e. it acted as a living oral history that is sourced in apostolic preaching, and therefore deserves to be preached!

It was also written under the shadow of escalating suspicion and hostility towards the new Christian sect (who were called 'cannibals', 'atheists' and 'enemies of mankind', due to rumours of their secret practice of eating 'body and blood', refusing to worship Roman gods, and abstention from attending the Gladiatorial games and temple sexual orgies that others routinely enjoyed. This hostility would soon erupt in full-blown persecution by the mid-60's AD, triggered by the Emperor Nero. Nero set fire to large wooden housing blocks to make way for his planned white marble new city. The homeless population of slaves and low-lives rioted against Nero, and he offered them a scapegoat by blaming the Christians. Over 2000 of their leaders and people perished by being burned alive or thrown to the lions, including Peter, who was crucified upside-down at his own request.

Another strong tradition about Mark is that he was the curious young secret spectator in the dark night of Gethsemane who barely escaped arrest along with Jesus, and who fled naked from the scene when his night-shirt was torn from his body in his panic to get away (Mark 14:51-52). Mark therefore knew something of the fear of a violent death that may come to some of us due to our connection with Jesus. This Gospel readied people for *martyrdom*. We may need to be ready for that possibility too!

One fascinating sidelight is the fact that Mark was nicknamed and known as *Colobodactylus* in the early church, "*Stumpfinger*"! One writer suggests he was a large man with disproportionately small fingers, hence the nick-name, just as we call people 'Shorty', 'Blue Eyes', 'Slim', or 'Ginger'. Mark clearly had short, fat, stubby fingers – perhaps a handicap for a writer – but he was fondly remembered for this by friends in his subsequent nickname, "*Stumpfinger*". Thankfully, he put those fingers to good use in 'taking pen to papyrus' and writing his Gospel, but it may have been an effort. Maybe that's why he kept his Gospel short! He wrote fewer words than the other Synoptic Gospels, but he wrote them very fast. This is the 'raciest' of all the four Gospels – and also the one most economically written in terms of sentences and words.

## **Theme**

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God's gospel centres upon Jesus His Son, and has now gone universal. It calls all men everywhere to saving faith, radical discipleship to Jesus, and Spirit-

empowered action like that of their Master himself, in order to advance His mission through the entire world and for all time.

Jesus' character, identity, words and deeds, are pacily recorded to draw people to Him, so they may be with him, then become like Him, and eventually go for Him – like Jesus' apostles did themselves (Mk. 6:13-18). Jesus is the central figure here, and closeness to Him is the essence of true life. Mark wants to get us to Jesus, so that Jesus can work on our lives, then plant within us His own new life and power.

By contrast, most people, and even Jesus' chosen disciples, do not come out too well in this work. Peter is not so much seen as the Chief Apostle but as the *Chief Sinner!* So, not even he has the place of prominence. The rest of the disciples are not yet worthy of following Jesus either. They are portrayed accurately as thick-skulled, dim-witted bigots, who are slow on the up-take, quick on self-promotion, and eventually shown to be nothing but a 'pack of cowards' and deserters! No salvation can be obtained from them, then. If salvation is possible at all, then it will have to be Jesus who accomplishes it. That's why we call this book a '*Gospel*' (Gk. *euangelion* – an announcement of wonderful news). It's 'good news' for people who can't save themselves. The Gospel puts no one on a pedestal but Jesus.

## **Style**

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Its universal intent as a totally new genre of literature that centres on a totally unique figure, shapes its appeal and attractiveness for outsiders – Jewish and Gentile. It is, as we've hinted, succinct, fast-paced, compellingly dramatic and completely accessible to all. Mark carefully explains the Jewish customs and background to incidents that some Gentiles might miss. He surely learned how to develop such a big heart for foreigners from Paul and Barnabas, and most certainly from the example of Jesus himself. Mark piles up incidents, and rushes pell-mell into fresh action, catching the reader up with his enthusiasm.

The reader is taken on a rapid excursion from the beginning to the end of Jesus' 3-year public ministry. Mark explodes current false expectations concerning the coming Messiah, underlining Jesus' authentic manhood, teasing out evidences of his full deity, unfolding expanding proofs of his supreme authority and power over mankind's worst enemies, then showing that their final defeat entailed his suffering even unto death, before His final Lordship over all things could be inaugurated by his resurrection. As a result, God's provisional unfolding of his Kingdom in the OT era, has now been fully expressed in God's final phase of redemption, with a view to accelerating its advance into the entire world.

This Kingdom undoes all that sin and Satan have so far foisted on deceived and sinful mankind, and then wickedly fomented among us. But now, God's salvation assaults and dismantles all that opposes God's intent for human welfare, including Disease, Demonisation, Derangement, Disaster, Deception and Death. This is why Mark is liberally sprinkled with narratives of healings, deliverance, nature miracles, urgent preaching missions, and even resurrections from the dead. This is all Jesus' doing. We contribute nothing to our salvation, except the sin that we need saving from.

## **Distinctive Features**

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Mark's simplicity appears succinct and unsophisticated to us, but his Gospel is a true and original work of art. It has been compared to a "docudrama", in that it interweaves action, sound-bites, snatches of dialogue and brief commentary, to enhance our growing understanding. There are scenes scanning astonished crowds, tense moments of opposition and danger, shock actions or words that leave 'knowing' audiences and better informed readers completely stunned, and a compelling plot that draws us to the surprise climax.

The author's literary style often interrupts the narrative with sudden diversions, leaving the reader in suspense and wondering 'What happened next?', then returning later to finally resolve the outcome for the anxious reader, so that we identify emotionally and fully with the original participants in the story. They were kept waiting too. See for example, the crisis raising of Jairus' 12 year old daughter, sandwiching the story of the woman suffering from 12 years of chronic gynaecological problems (Mark 5:21-43). We're forced to ask, 'Who will Jesus deal with first?' The effect is to engage the reader's sustained attention, just as modern 'soaps' and TV drama series try to do with their viewers.

This is essentially a 'hero story', but one like no other. It contains nothing about Jesus' birth, childhood or early career, as we've noted. With little or no introduction, Jesus steps full-grown unto the stage of history in the midst of escalating religious and political tensions within Roman-occupied Palestine. Israel's fortunes have relentlessly hit a new low. Hope is either dead or deviant. Messianic expectations are at an all-time high, yet misleading, since they were largely defined by Israel's religious leaders in terms of anti-Roman militaristic conquest and violent revolutionary fervour.

In contrast, Mark defines rescue and redemption in entirely new and unforeseen terms, though OT prophets like Isaiah voiced these features clearly. Jesus shuns the sword and deliberately neglects to recruit, train and deploy an army of armed combatants to establish his political claims. God's promised Messianic Kingdom

rejects all violence except that of which the Messiah himself became a victim. Instead, it involves crisis moments such as a call, a crisis of faith, then the public plunge of water baptism as a sign of radical repentance and total obedience, accompanied by a life-long preparedness to serve and to suffer. Its weapons are not those of worldly Emperors and Empires, but apparently weak and ineffective ones that include 'mere' words, personal testimony, unwelcome pronouncements, puzzling parables, shocking wonders, generous giving, random acts of kindness, boundary-breaking mission, the undoing of dead traditions and taboos, and a willingness to lay down one's life in whatever way God directs in order to finish the task, because of the certain prospect of an assured future resurrection.

The tongue is mightier than the sword. But this does not mean controversy, polemics and violence will be absent from Christ's Kingdom advance. It's just that Christ-followers will *invite* such reactions and fall victim to them like Jesus himself did, rather than deliberately provoke them or perpetrate such violence upon others. This is the way the Master went, should not the servant walk it still?

Mark therefore allows us to observe Jesus alone and in crowds, with individuals and small groups, in crises and casual encounters, in public and private, in serenity and mortal danger, in prayer and public preaching. All this, with a view to provoking the inevitable questions: '*Who is He?*', '*What has He come to accomplish?*', and '*What has all this got to do with me?*'

## **Game of two halves**

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Mark takes a relatively quick stroll for the first eight chapters, through scenes of Jesus' speaking and acting, drawing us after him with the call, '*Follow me*'. But then, the last eight chapters rush at break-neck speed to Jesus' death – the climax of the book. Mark could be seen as a modern tabloid journalist and press photographer who spreads a collage of astonishing verbal and visual snap-shots concerning the world's most enduring and celebrated figure, each accompanied by the raciest and most provocative story-telling and commentary ever written. The overall result is a concise, racy, eye-witness testimony and vivid report from the world's most troubled war-zone of all – the human heart. Mark forces upon each one of his readers the question that is answered in every paragraph of this Gospel: '*What if God was one of us?*' It is the task of every preacher and hearer to come up with the most compelling and accurate insights and answers to that inquiry that they can obtain, and especially in pursuit of the explanation for Jesus' hideous final death by crucifixion.

The last eight chapters of Mark are dominated by 'death talk'. Why? Partly because you and I have got to die some day – and usually, we don't want to. But mostly, because Jesus had to die in order to be able to reverse that dismal, dire end for us

all. The final outcome of this age-long battle of Jesus with the diabolical power of evil has already been decided, but its day-to-day advances and disappointing setbacks are still being fought out all over the world, one life at a time.

To the Greeks, death was tragic, so they often wrote tragic dramas about it. But Jesus' very intentional race towards death and his refusal to be diverted from it, along with his triumphant words about it, all make clear that to Jesus at least his death was not a tragedy. Instead, it was the climax of his mission, and issued in his greatest achievements of all. In Mark, the account of Jesus' resurrection and emergence from death is the sudden, surprising, but vital and surely predictable outcome of all Jesus had achieved and promised. It's summarised in a succinct post-script. Just a few details on the final mopping-up operation, that are designed to underline the inevitable stated outcome of knowing who it was who died, and what happened there, and why he did it. It was for us, and our total rescue. We now get to share in its life-imparting power in ways more wonderful than we could ever have anticipated. We get to become a people '*with signs following them*', that is people who carry the presence of God and spread its supernatural fall-out in words and wonders wherever they go! In believing such good news, we become a supernatural people, doing supernatural things, through a supernatural God, so that others may discover this God in Jesus for themselves (Mark 16:9-20).

These final verses of Mark are often deemed to be a later editorial addition, and possibly unreliable since some ancient manuscripts omit them. But since they summarise the same facts recorded in Luke 24, John 20 and the Book of Acts it's more likely they were cut out of some copies, due to the controversial truths they contain! I doubt Mark ended his Gospel at Mark 16:8, as some would have us believe, thus ending his work as inconclusively as a modern French existentialist novelist might do! Instead, we are assured by the promise of God that if we go forth with Christ's life-transforming words, God will back us with his life-enhancing wonders that will impact lives! This is normal New Testament Christianity.

Mark has set out his apologetic and advocacy for Jesus in such a way that every reader and observer is compelled to answer the most important questions of all, questions like "*Who is this Jesus?*", "*Why does He really matter?*" and "*Whose side am I on?*"

It will take us all many months to facilitate this more completely, but the journey for us will be well worth it. *Mark my words!*

**Greg Haslam**  
**May 2010**

## Recommended commentaries

C.E.B. Cranfield	<i>The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary</i> (CUP)
Michael Eaton	<i>Preaching Through the Bible – MARK</i> (Sovereign World)
Donald English	<i>The Message of Mark</i> (BST)
David E. Garland	<i>The NIV Application Commentary – MARK</i> (Zondervan)
R. Kent Hughes	<i>Preaching the Word – MARK</i> (2 volumes, Crossway Books)
William L. Lane	<i>The Gospel According to Mark</i> (NICNT)
Tom Wright	<i>Mark for Everyone</i> (SPCK)

# Outline of Mark's Gospel

<b>Part 1:</b>	<b>The revelation of Jesus as Messiah</b>
1:1	Title
1:2-8	The Ministry of John the Baptist
1:9-11	The Baptism of Jesus
1:12-13	The Temptation of Jesus
1:14- 20	The Call of the first disciples
1:21-45	The Authority of Jesus in his deeds
2:1-22	Ministry in Capernaum
2:23-3:12	The Sabbath Controversy
3:13-19	The Calling of the Twelve
3:20-35	Growing controversy surrounding Jesus
4:1-34	The Parables of the Kingdom
4:35-5:43	Miracles around Galilee
6:1-6	Unbelief in Nazareth
6:7-13	The Twelve sent out in Jesus' work
6:14-29	The execution of John the Baptist
6:30-56	Further miracles
7:1-23	Teaching on uncleanness
7:24-8:10	Miracles in Gentile territory
8:11-21	The Pharisees and Disciples lack of understanding
8:22-26	A blind man sees again
<b>Part 2:</b>	<b>The revelation of Jesus' suffering as the Messiah</b>
8:27-30	Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah
8:31-38	Jesus defines cross-shaped discipleship
9:1-13	The Transfiguration
9:14-29	Jesus heals a demoniac
9:30-50	Teaching on servant leadership
10:1-12	Teaching on Marriage and Divorce
10:13-16	Jesus welcomes little children
10:17-31	The rich man and true wealth
10:32-45	The Disciples called to suffering and service
10:46-52	Bartimaeus receives his sight
11:1-11	Christ's entry into Jerusalem
11:12-19	The cleansing of the Temple
11:20-12:44	Controversy with the religious leaders
13:1-37	Teaching on the Last Days
14:1-25	The Last Supper
14:26-52	Christ betrayed in Gethsemane
14:53-15:15	The Trials and Condemnation of Jesus
15:16-47	The Death and Burial of Jesus
16:1-20	The Resurrection and Last Commission of Jesus