

MARK

Dick France

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

PREFACE

The first issue had no space for a preface, so all the general things I wanted to say about my approach to Mark had to go into the first two readings. Since then I have published a much bigger commentary on Mark (719 pages, on the Greek text!) and an even bigger one on Matthew. But further study has not changed my overall approach to the Gospel in any significant way, and I hope readers will still be willing to tackle those first two readings seriously before launching into the text proper. Mark left us a *book*, not a collection of individual readings, and it is only when we appreciate his work as a whole that we have the necessary framework into which the individual parts can be fitted with real understanding.

It is always a pleasure to hear from readers who have found benefit from one's writing. I have been especially pleased that several have told me that they have taken up my suggestion of reading or listening to the whole of Mark's Gospel in a single session (either alone or in a group) before tackling the individual readings, and that this has given them a new, and sometimes significantly different, appreciation of Mark's message. I am happy to repeat that recommendation for a new generation of readers.

Shelagh Brown, who originally commissioned this commentary, has been sadly missed. I am grateful to Naomi Starkey for so ably filling her place, and for sensitive editorial guidance.

Enjoy Mark!

Dick France

CONTENTS

	Introduction	11
1	A drama in three acts	14
2	Setting the scene	16
3	The forerunner	18
4	What happened at Jesus' baptism	20
5	In the wilderness	22
6	The mission begins in Galilee	24
7	Partners in mission	26
8	Something new in the synagogue	28
9	In the evening	30
10	Keeping on the move	32
11	'Unclean! unclean!'	34
12	'Who can forgive sins?'	36
13	Disreputable company	38
14	Old and new in religion	40
15	In the cornfields	42
16	More trouble on the sabbath	44
17	Beside the seaside	46
18	Twelve good men and true?	48
19	How do you explain Jesus?	50
20	'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'	52
21	Insiders and outsiders	54
22	Introducing Mark's chapter of parables	56
23	What is a parable?	58
24	What happened to the seeds?	60
25	The secret	62
26	Spelling it out	64
27	More pregnant sayings	66
28	The dynamics of growth	68
29	From the least to the greatest	70
30	Storm at sea	72
31	A hopeless case	74
32	A short stay in Decapolis	76

33	'Who touched me?'	78
34	'Not dead, but sleeping'	80
35	A difficult visit to Nazareth	82
36	The mission is extended	84
37	Jesus and John the Baptist	86
38	The dance of death	88
39	An abortive 'retreat'	90
40	Food in the wilderness	92
41	Panic on the lake	94
42	More healings	96
43	What is purity?	98
44	Putting the cart before the horse	100
45	Clean hands and a pure heart	102
46	Crumbs for the Gentiles	104
47	Another Gentile healed	106
48	Food for the Gentiles too	108
49	Asking for a sign	110
50	Difficult questions on the lake	112
51	A blind man cured—by stages	114
52	Peter declares his faith	116
53	A dose of cold water	118
54	Ultimate realities	120
55	The veil is drawn aside	122
56	What about Elijah?	124
57	Why the disciples failed	126
58	Another warning of what is to come	128
59	Who is the greatest?	130
60	'Not one of us'	132
61	Hard sayings	134
62	No place for divorce	136
63	Did Jesus really mean it?	138
64	Whose is the kingdom of God?	140
65	A potential disciple lost	142
66	No hope for the rich?	144
67	The death march	146

68	An inappropriate request	148
69	'Not so among you'	150
70	Another blind man	152
71	The arrival of the king	154
72	A demonstration in the temple	156
73	The fruitless fig tree	158
74	The challenge from officialdom	160
75	Getting rid of the son	162
76	The poll tax	164
77	The God of the living	166
78	The two great commandments	168
79	David's Lord	170
80	A telling contrast	172
81	The temple to be destroyed	174
82	The disciples' question	176
83	The beginning of the birth-pangs	178
84	Crisis in Judea	180
85	The climax of judgment	182
86	An unknown day	184
87	A woman to be remembered	186
88	The priests and Judas Iscariot	188
89	The Passover meal	190
90	Startling symbolism	192
91	Trouble ahead	194
92	Gethsemane	196
93	Betrayal and arrest	198
94	Before the Sanhedrin	200
95	The secret is unveiled	202
96	The witness who failed	204
97	Enter Pontius Pilate	206
98	Barabbas	208
99	Homage to the 'king'	210
100	Golgotha	212
101	Mockery	214
102	Alone on the cross	216

103	The end?	218
104	Dead and buried	220
105	'He is not here'	222
106	How did Mark finish his Gospel?	224
107	Mark's good news—a retrospective	226

PBC MARK: INTRODUCTION

Many members of the first-century churches could not read, and many more could not afford to possess a scroll of their own. So we should think of our New Testament books as intended to be read aloud, when the members of the church were gathered together.

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four, may well have been intended to be read out in a single session. It takes about an hour and a half to read aloud, and the experience of listening to it (and still more of reading it) in this way is thrilling, as those who have attended Alec McCowan's hugely popular one-man recitations of the Gospel will know.

Mark the storyteller

It is when you read Mark's gospel in a single session that you see most clearly what a well-written story it is. Threads of continuity come to light, and there is a skilful build-up (and sometimes release) of tension, comparable to that achieved by some of the best dramatists.

The author must have been a popular communicator. His style is more expansive and vivid than that of the other gospel writers, and he seems to relish a lively scene. His gospel is shorter than the others not because he writes concisely (where he runs parallel with the other gospels, especially Matthew, he is often much more long-winded), but because he has limited his material. While he says much about Jesus' power as a teacher, he offers less of his actual teaching than the other gospels. He writes rather of eager crowds and impressive miracles, of dramatic confrontation with opponents both human and demonic. He allows us to feel the disconcerting impact of Jesus on his often bewildered disciples, and to share with them the experience of having their world turned upside-down by the revolutionary values of the kingdom of God. He presents in all its starkness the paradox of a rejected and executed Messiah, of a Son of God who meets with incomprehension and hostility from the people of God.

It is all intensely moving, as the story forges ahead with breathless urgency towards the inevitable showdown in Jerusalem, where on a small local stage a drama of cosmic proportions is played out.

The trouble is that for most Christian readers it is now all so familiar that it is almost impossible for us to feel the disconcerting and yet

exhilarating impact which the story must have had on those who first heard it. Let me urge you, therefore, if you possibly can, to arrange at best to hear Mark's story told in a single session, or, failing that, to set aside an hour and a half and read it through yourself (in a modern version) as if it were a novel, trying to put yourself in the position of those who first heard the story and for whom it was all so powerfully new. When you have done that, you will be in a better position to see the significance of the individual sections as we work through them in this book.

Mark and Peter

Very early Christian tradition tells us that the Gospel was written by John Mark of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), who was later a colleague both of Paul (Acts 12:25; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) and of Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and that it was when he was Peter's assistant that Mark decided to record the stories about Jesus which Peter was in the habit of telling in his later days in Rome. The early writers are divided as to whether he did this while Peter was still alive (and with his blessing) or after Peter's death in, probably, AD64 or 65. It seems a plausible tradition, and in Mark's action-packed gospel it may well be that we hear at least an echo of the enthusiastic way in which Peter would have told the stories of the man who had changed his own life and outlook so irrevocably.

The value of Mark

In the early centuries of the church's life Mark's gospel was undervalued. It was felt to be inferior especially to that of Matthew, which had so much more detailed teaching of Jesus, and went into greater theological depths. Since they believed that Matthew's gospel was written first, Mark was too easily dismissed as his 'lackey and abridger' (Augustine). It was only with the growth in the nineteenth century of the belief that Mark was the earliest gospel that this shorter book came into its own. Nowadays most scholars value Mark as the earliest surviving record of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

Mark's Greek is lively but not very polished, in the style of the popular storyteller, rather than the sophisticated prose of a professional writer. Where a stylist would recommend subordinate clauses, Mark often strings sentences together with a simple 'and', so that the

story rattles quite jerkily along. He is particularly fond of moving the action on with 'immediately' (eleven times in chapter 1 alone, though English versions tend to ration them). It is not easy to get bored as you listen to Mark!

Dick France

A DRAMA *in* THREE ACTS

After a prologue which sets the scene, Mark's story unfolds in three main sections, each of which has a distinct geographical setting:

1:1–13	Prologue (set in 'the wilderness')
1:14—8:21	Act 1: Galilee
8:22—10:52	Act 2: On the way to Jerusalem
11:1—16:8	Act 3: Jerusalem

The different geographical locations of the three acts serve to show the movement of the story towards its conclusion in Jerusalem, but there is much more to the three-act division than that. The story moves through three distinct phases, in terms both of the nature of Jesus' ministry and of the way people react to it, while the geographical movements serve to underline, and in a significant way even to symbolize, this movement of the plot towards its climax.

Galilee and Jerusalem

Few modern readers of the New Testament realize that first-century Palestine was not a simple unity. Galilee, where most of Jesus' story takes place, was in almost every way separate from Judea (and its capital, Jerusalem). Between them stood the hostile territory of Samaria. Their histories had been separate for most of the 1,000 years since the days of a united Israel under David and Solomon, and they lived under different political systems (at the time of Jesus, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor in Judea, Herod Antipas the Jewish 'king' in Galilee). Galilee was for most of its history more subject to foreign control, and had been dubbed by Isaiah 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. Its Jewish population were regarded by the Judean Jews as both racially suspect and religiously unorthodox. Galileans had their own dialect of Aramaic, and a Galilean Jew in Jerusalem would have been as obviously 'foreign' as an Irishman in London or a Texan in New York.

The plot

Jesus was a Galilean, and it is in Galilee that Mark tells of the warm popular response to his ministry. It is this period of 'success' which

dominates Act 1, set in Galilee; Jesus is among his own people. Of course there are doubters and outright opponents even in this part of the story, but it is significant that Mark twice makes the point that these opponents are not local, but have come 'from Jerusalem' (3:22; 7:1).

Act 3 begins with Jesus' arrival, for the first time in Mark's narrative, in Jerusalem, where he is a stranger. Here, by contrast with Act 1, apart from the Galilean disciples who have come with Jesus to Jerusalem and escort him triumphantly into the city, the overall picture is one of darkness and increasing confrontation, leading up to the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities of the capital. The darkness is relieved by the prediction of resurrection, but it is not in Jerusalem but in Galilee that the risen Lord will again meet his disciples (14:28; 16:7). Between these two sharply opposed scenes, Act 2 forms a bridge in two main ways (apart from the geographical movement from north to south). First, it is punctuated by Jesus' explicit predictions of the fate which awaits him in Jerusalem (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), so that the shadow of the cross now falls darkly across the story, and Jesus' determined southward journey becomes a death-march. Secondly, the focus of his ministry now moves from public preaching and miracles to the private instruction of his disciples, preparing them for what lies ahead, and patiently re-educating them away from facile hopes of glory to the acceptance of the way of the cross, and the whole new scale of values which it entails.

Reading Mark

All this adds up to a deliberate and quite sophisticated shaping of the story which we do well to notice if we are to hear the story of Jesus as Mark (and Peter) told it. To see Jesus in this human dimension of a divided society is to be made even more aware of how he challenges and overturns all human expectations. The kingdom of God does not operate according to the rules of the kingdoms of this world. It is a kingdom in which the last are first and the first last, where greatness is in humble service and where death is the way to life.

Was there ever another drama like this one?

PRAYER

*Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things
out of your law (Psalm 119:18).*

SETTING *the* SCENE

‘The wilderness’, mentioned four times in verses 1–13 and never again in Mark’s Gospel, is a pointer to the different focus in these introductory paragraphs. They are set not among human society in Galilee or Judea, but in the uninhabited land around the Jordan. Before the story proper begins, Mark as it were takes us aside into a lonely place to brief us on what it will all be about.

A glimpse behind the scenes

What he offers in his prologue (1:1–13) is a glimpse behind the scenes, to help us to grasp the deeper significance of the human stories which will follow. First a sonorous quotation from the prophetic hopes of the Old Testament leads us via the larger-than-life figure of John the Baptist in the wilderness to ponder the identity of the even greater one whose coming he announced. And there in the wilderness we see heaven opened, and hear the voice of God himself endorsing the mission of his Son. In the wilderness too we see Jesus in the company of Satan and angels. The supernatural dimension to these opening scenes is further reinforced by noticing that Mark, who elsewhere seldom mentions the Spirit of God, here includes three references to him.

All this provides us, the readers, with a privileged access to the real significance of what is to follow, supplying a dimension which we might otherwise easily lose sight of in the hurly-burly of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee, and still more later in Jerusalem.

Good news

When Mark wrote his book, ‘gospel’ was not the name of a kind of writing, but meant simply ‘good news’. That is how Mark labels the story he is about to tell: this is worth hearing! The opening verse sums it up by reminding us of who Jesus is. First he is the Messiah—and it is worth remembering whenever we read of ‘Christ’ in the New Testament that it is not just a name but the special title, which surely no Jew could hear without excitement, of the promised deliverer of God’s people. And secondly he is the ‘Son of God’, a term which Mark will record at several key points in his story, and which

immediately alerts us to expect something more than the biography of an ordinary man.

A voice in the wilderness

So we begin with some words from the Old Testament to alert us to the importance of the story to follow. They are words which take us to the heart of the hope which had grown throughout the Old Testament period that one day God would act decisively to fulfil his purpose for his people.

The quotation from 'Isaiah' in verses 2–3 is in fact a combination of related prophetic texts about 'preparing the way'. Malachi 3:1 speaks of a messenger who will prepare the people for the Lord's coming as judge, while in Isaiah 40:3 a voice in the wilderness proclaims that God is about to come and deliver his people from their long exile. The messenger and the 'voice' are heralds, forerunners of the great day of God's decisive action. It is all about to begin, here in the wilderness.

But the person of whom these prophecies speak is not yet Jesus. Jesus will not appear until verse 9. The forerunner of God is another and slightly earlier prophet, John. Before Jesus even appears on the scene, the drama has begun, and scripture is being fulfilled as a new voice is heard in the wilderness, calling the people of God to repentance, so that they will be ready for the Lord's coming.

We shall meet this extraordinary prophetic figure in the next study.

PRAYER

Thank you that this book is 'good news'. Help us to appreciate how important it is, to be excited about it, and to be as eager as Mark was to pass it on to others.

The FORERUNNER

John the Baptist was a more important figure than many Christians today realize. Indeed, in Josephus' history of the Jews in the first century there is more about John than about Jesus. He made a big impact with his 'revivalist' movement down in the Jordan valley, and Jesus several times referred back to him with appreciation. In a sense, Jesus carried on where John left off, and people naturally saw Jesus as John's successor, despite the difference in their styles of ministry.

The prophet of restoration

Just as Old Testament prophets had often called on Israel to return from their backsliding and to live again as the people of God, so now John calls for repentance and for a new start. His rough clothes are modelled on those of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and like Elijah he preaches an uncompromising message and calls people to decision. Those who knew the prophecy of Malachi 4:5–6 that Elijah must return to prepare for the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord would not have been slow to see the connection. Here in the wilderness something of decisive significance is beginning.

As a symbol of their repentance, John baptizes those who respond to his message. This was a novel and rather shocking idea, since baptism was the means by which Gentiles who wished to adopt the Jewish religion were admitted to the community of Israel, as 'proselytes'. But these people John is preaching to are Jews! In asking them to be baptized he is in effect declaring that their Jewishness is in itself no guarantee that they are right with God; they too need a new start. As they join him in the water of the Jordan they are enrolling in a new community of the forgiven and restored people of God, a true 'remnant' in whom God's purposes for Israel can be carried forward. Israel is being reborn.

Looking forward

But John does not think that he is himself the one who will effectively restore Israel. He is only the herald, the 'voice in the wilderness'. So he points forward to someone still to come, someone 'more powerful'. John's baptism in Jordan water is merely a symbol of renewal,

but the ‘more powerful one’ will bring the true baptism not with physical water but with the Holy Spirit. Those upon whom the Spirit of God comes will know true inward renewal. That will be the real thing.

So who is the ‘more powerful one’? Christians, who know the story already, will answer without hesitation that it is Jesus—and in verse 9, sure enough, Jesus will ‘come’, as John has predicted. But wait a minute. In Old Testament prophecy the one who will pour out the Spirit in the last days is God himself. And the verses which Mark has quoted from Malachi and Isaiah speak of a herald of the coming of God. So John’s language would naturally have been understood by those who heard him (and by John himself?) as referring not to any human figure but to the imminent coming of God to judge and save his people, as the prophets had so often foretold. The fact that it was in the coming of Jesus that his prediction of the ‘more powerful one’ was fulfilled suggests something amazingly far-reaching about who Jesus is: more than a prophet like John, more even than only a human Messiah. In the coming of Jesus, God comes, for, as Mark has already reminded us, Jesus is himself the ‘Son of God’.

For MEDITATION

Who are the true people of God today? If John were to preach among us now, who would respond?

Are there ways in which we focus our attention on the outward and symbolic (like John’s baptism with water) rather than on the inward and real?

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