

First Sunday of Advent

The Year of Saint Mark



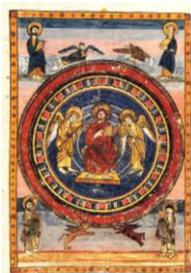
On the First Sunday of Advent the Church begins a New Year. At this time we change over in the cycle of Readings at Mass for both Sundays and Weekdays. The Weekdays in Ordinary time will follow Year 1 of the two year cycle. The Sundays will follow Year 2 (or B).

In Year B we hear mainly passages from the Gospel of Saint Mark although there is a period in Summer months when we listen to Chapter 6 of Saint John.

Saint Mark's is the shortest of the four Gospels. Even though there is a tradition that Saint Matthew was the first to write a Gospel in Hebrew it seems that the one we have by Mark is the oldest one to survive.

Like the other Gospels it is written in Greek and was proclaimed in that language until it was thought wise to produce translations to make the message more available. In Western Europe this meant putting the Gospels and indeed the whole Bible into Latin.

Saint Mark is often signified by a winged-lion. It is an image drawn from the book of Revelation, 'And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion' (Rev:4:6-7)



Saint Bede used the Latin version of the Bible called the Vulgate, a translation by Saint Jerome, one of the great scripture scholars of the Early Church. It would have been used for Mass, the worship of the community, and for study.

He would have known an older translation as well. A copy purchased by Benet Biscop during one of his trips to Italy was kept in the monastic library. The illustrations of the famous Codex Amiatinus produced in the Jarrow Scriptorium and now to be seen in Florence seem to be inspired by this ancient manuscript.

The text of the wonderful Lindisfarne Gospels would also most likely have been produced from a translation by Saint Jerome brought to Monkwearmouth/Jarrow by Benet Biscop. If you have seen the Gospels in the British Library you may have noticed there is a translation in Old English in between the lines of the Latin text which was added by the monk Aldred.

Saint Mark's Gospel is a wonderful telling of the story of Jesus. Mark wrote with faith. In other words he doesn't just give us the bare facts but shapes the telling of the story (as does anybody really as they tell a story) to help us understand what it means.

This illuminated page from the Lindisfarne Gospels gives us Saint Mark's introductory line that sets the scene

'The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'.

In these few words there is a wealth of meaning.



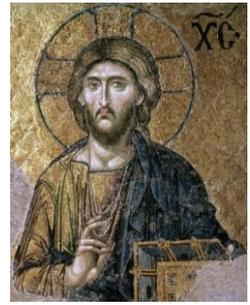
By using that word 'beginning' he calls to mind the start of the whole Bible in the book of Genesis – 'in the *beginning* God made the heavens and the earth'.

Mark is saying that in this story everything has a new start, a new hope. He tells us that it is 'Good News' – he is not just going to tell us what happened but he will show us how these events make a difference to our lives.



The story is to be about Jesus. We know that the name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour' or 'God saves'. It wasn't a unique name at that time – it's the same name as 'Joshua'.

In case anyone might think he is going to write of an ordinary person called 'Jesus/Joshua', Mark adds another word 'Christ' with which we often think of as just another name.



It is a title which means 'Anointed'. Saint Mark, who believed in Jesus, wanted us to understand that the events he will describe are about a man who was the Anointed Saviour whose coming meant the world begins anew.

Mark goes even further. To cap it all he tells us that Jesus is 'the Son of God'. In a way this is the most mysterious of all that is said in that first sentence. What does Mark mean by 'the Son of God'?



This leads to one of the most interesting aspects of the Gospel of Saint Mark. The question will keep coming up 'who is this man?' Mark portrays Jesus as consistently sidestepping the question.

Mark has told the reader at the outset who Jesus is, but the characters he describes meeting Jesus are in the dark – they wonder who he really is.

Another feature of Saint Mark's Gospel is the personality of Jesus that comes across. It is not what we might expect from that opening declaration.

The Son of God does not stride across the world in lordly majesty; he does not win people over by winning personality, power or strength. Mark writes about a person who is human and frail.



It is the most challenging thing to discover the Son of God in the form of a human being. This will be at the heart of Jesus' rejection by the authorities; they cannot accept a Christ, a Messiah, who is humble and gentle.

Mark reinforces this in his telling of the story when he describes the culmination of everything.

He does not focus so much on the Resurrection of Jesus but rather on his Crucifixion.



He describes Jesus before his death crying out on the Cross,

'My God, my God why have you forsaken me'.

Mark tells us that there was a witness to these events.

Astonishingly, this witness was not one of the disciples, he was not even one of the chosen people.

A pagan, he was one of the executioners.

It is a soldier who echoes the opening idea and answers the whole question that runs through this short Gospel,

'Truly, this was the Son of God'.

Saint Mark wants us to see that Jesus is shown to be the new beginning, the Saviour, the Christ, when gave his life on the Cross.

This is the message of a God who suffers with and for his people. It is a challenge for us to believe. To accept Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God who came in humility and who is, to this day, rejected by many is a step into unknown.

It is in weakness and in suffering that God is to be found at work.