

3rd Sunday (B)

21st January 2024

'St Mark's Gospel: an overview; an urgency'

Jonah 3: Jonah preaches to Nineveh and they repent Ps 24: *Lord, make me know*

your ways 1Cor 7: *the world as we know it is passing away*

Mk 1: 14–20: call of first disciples

Did you notice the real *urgency* in all the readings today?

Jonah was sent to Nineveh, and they lost no time in repenting their sins and renouncing their evil behaviour; St Paul reminds the Corinthians that “*time is growing short,*” the time to start adhering to Christ and practising the faith; and in the Gospel Jesus is beginning His public ministry, and wastes no time in calling His first disciples, two pairs of brothers, who follow Him *immediately*. All, I suppose, echoes of that one basic imperative of the “Good News from God” — “*The Kingdom of God is at hand!*”

For 5 years now, we have kept the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time as the ‘[*Sunday of the Word of God*](#),’ as requested by Pope Francis in late 2019. It’s chosen for this Sunday because each year it’s the time when we start our systematic reading of the Gospel for that year (Matthew in ‘Yr A’; Mark in ‘Yr B’; Luke in ‘Yr C’). It’s an ideal moment to look ahead to the Gospel (this year, St Mark’s)

that we’re going to be hearing from in the year ahead.

St Mark’s is the shortest of the Gospels (just 16 chs.), and many scholars claim that it’s the original Gospel to have been written down, maybe as early as the mid-50s of the 1st c., but at least by the mid-60s. St Mark himself wasn’t an apostle, of course, but he does get fleeting mentions in the New Testament: he seems to have had good contacts in Jerusalem; he travelled with St Paul on his 1st missionary journey, but they fell out around the time of planning the 2nd missionary journey, and St Mark joined up instead with St Barnabas; in fact, he could well have been a relative of St Barnabas, and also of St Peter’s wife. Certainly St Mark seems to have been in the immediate circle of the apostles and early Christian leaders. His was, therefore, if not a first-hand account of Jesus’s life and ministry, certainly a nearly-first-hand account!

How did it come about that St Mark collated the accounts and teachings that form his ‘*Gospel*’? — that’s a word he coins in the very first verse (1:1) of his account: “*the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” Well, the

evidence of various writers in the early Church points to the fact that St Mark spent time as the secretary, or scribe, or interpreter, by St Peter's side, perhaps in Rome prior to St Peter's death c. 64AD. It looks as if Mark's Gospel is effectively a writing-up of the preaching of St Peter: this would explain all the 1st-hand accounts, specific details, and immediacy of his Gospel. It doesn't hang around, it gets to the point; there's an *urgency* / a directness about St Mark's account, just as if taken from the oral tradition of a preacher like St Peter. I've particularly noticed this breathless urgency in St Mark's Gospel when reading aloud passages of his in the ESV translation. [The [ESV](#) will be the translation used in the new English lectionary for Mass as of next Advent.] In the ESV, as in the original Greek, pretty much every other sentence begins with *και* ("and"), sometimes almost *every* sentence; it's a bit like a child's excited little essay, "and next we did this this, and next we did that, and then we went here, and then we saw so-and-so." Animated, pressing-on, no time to lose: there's a Gospel to be preached, and it's urgent; that's what Mark

is like. No wonder, in fact, it's a Gospel that has occasionally been delivered on stage, in one sitting, memorized by an actor; it has the dramatic quality of language that holds the hearer through a bit over 2.5hrs of monologue. I'd love to hear such a telling one day.

For sure, St Mark's Gospel doesn't hang around at all. There's no infancy narrative; no mention of anything prior to John the Baptist's ministry at the Jordan; there's just the briefest of intros; Jesus's appearing there and being baptized; with the temptations in the wilderness that followed after. That's the first 13 vv. of ch.1, and then we get straight in to the passage we heard today. And still, no hanging around: right 'up front' (v. 15) we get the most basic summary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and its consequences: Our Lord stating categorically at the outset, "*The time is fulfilled, and Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.*" And then ...? Well, with barely a breath, it's on to Lake Galilee, where He calls the first four disciples to follow him, to share in this life-saving message; and again, with this immediacy

characteristic of Mark's Gospel, Peter & Andrew, James & John, just leave their nets and follow Him! How so? How make such a momentous choice on so little reflection? Was Jesus's personality so mesmerizing? Or were they looking for a quick way out of a dead-end fishing job? No doubt the divine person of Jesus, and His words, were indeed impossible to ignore. But still, we know that those 4 fisher-disciples did have other encounters with Jesus at the beginning: just last week (in St John's Gospel, ch. 1) Andrew is sent by John the Baptist to pursue Jesus instead, and Andrew takes Peter his brother to Jesus the next day; and from St Luke's Gospel (ch. 5) we have the incident with the fish, when Jesus advises Peter to put out again from shore, after a fruitless night, and try again for a catch, and the haul they bring in is almost too great for the two boats. Yes, there were other meetings, other conversations, other evidence, other points of conviction. Even so, as St Mark tells it, it was pretty spontaneous; they clearly didn't agonize for weeks and weeks over it! Whatever was going on, and it was quite extraordinary, they were being asked

to be part of it; and they didn't find that they could say 'no.' That godly urgency was carrying them with it; the Kingdom of Heaven is *at hand*. Jesus invited them *now*; *now* is the moment to say, "Yes, Lord, I follow You!"

I suppose we could say that St Mark's key Gospel themes boil down to 2 questions: '*Who is Jesus?*' and '*How do I follow Him?*' St Mark doesn't hide the fact that the apostles struggled with these questions. They lurched between understanding and not understanding; but, trained by Jesus's divine and loving hand, they gradually came to know what it meant to follow Him. That will be our journey, too, as we listen carefully to, and pray and reflect on, the Gospel passages offered to us in 'Ordinary Time' (Yr 'B,' the Year of Mark). In the remaining time before Lent — three more Sundays — we won't even get beyond Mk 1 and the initial Galilee lakeside-town ministry. It'll be mid-*September* (24th Sun in OT) before we get to the *turning-point* of the whole Gospel, in ch. 8, the exact mid-point, when the apostles are finally ready to commit to answering that question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" —

as Peter does, for them, “*You are the Christ*” — and then commence answering the even harder question, ‘How do I follow, You, Jesus? ... now I know that You are the Christ?’ (which is the object of the 2nd half of the Gospel, chs. 8–13, with ch. 14, the Last Supper and Arrest; ch. 15, the Passion & Death; ch. 16, the Resurrection). OK, so it’s drawn out across the year, at Mass: we’ll have time to take a small piece of Mark at a time — chew, reflect, draw out the meaning — but yet it’s short. It *is* short; you could devour it in one sitting if you chose to. I’m not saying you should; but I *am* saying that you should *devour* it somehow. Have you ever read a Gospel text cover to cover? This is your chance! Read St Mark, cover to cover. In a bible on my shelf that I referred to yesterday Mark is just 27 pages (pp. 50–76); it comes in at under 15,000 words. Why not set yourself to do this? — in your own timescale, but starting today and not tomorrow; sooner rather than later. Begin the Gospel; read at your own pace; put down and pick up as and when; but leave a bookmark in the place, or leave the bible open at the page, so that it’s

not abandoned, gathering dust, but there’s a sense of continuing-on the reading. (And if you’ve actually read all of St Mark before, then of course just choose another Gospel / another NT text.) It’s the Sunday of the Word of God: I think that today we *should* be making some urgent commitment to the Word of God, in some shape or form.

Let’s respond to the great and gripping urgency of St Mark with an urgency all our own that is a desire to respond as Jeremiah once did: “*When Your words came, I devoured them; Your word was my delight and the joy of my heart, for I was called by Your Name, Lord God of Sabaoth.*” Jesus’s Word — His *urgent* Word in the Gospel, in the Mass — and our response — trusting Him, following Him — this is what St Mark sets out to teach us with His powerful Gospel: the call to discipleship that we, and all humanity, simply cannot ignore, “*Come, follow Me.*” You’ve said ‘Yes;’ you’re on the journey and listening to Him; He can take you at the pace He desires; but the urgency is that you set out with Him ... and not just let Him pass on by.