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The Gospel of Mark: Pastoral response to a
Life or Death Situation?
Some Reflections

E. A. Russell

The title of this paper assumes that Mark has a coherent aim which integrates his gospel, i.e. that to understand him we must have a so-called "holistic" approach. The impact of a reading of all Mark's gospel by Alec McCowen in the Opera House Belfast aroused people to an awareness of how effective it could be. Such a thing had not been experienced before. Since, however, the material Mark uses was probably oral, from differing situations and with differing aims perhaps, such an integration would be all the more remarkable. It would of course not be surprising if such traditions at times fit in uneasily. But even granting this, it is the contention of this paper that single dominant theme is discernible, however loosely it may appear at times. /1

If then enquiry is made after the theme of the gospel of Mark, the answer could hardly be closer at hand than in the opening verse: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (1.1) ie taking the punctuation as being a full stop after "Son of God". This is not meant to be a deliberate ignoring of the familiar textual problem as to whether the ending should be "Jesus Christ" or "Son of God". It is a recognition that, since the evidence is evenly balanced and textual principles adduced in support of either, the occurrences of the phrase "Son of God", often at crucial points in the gospel, would persuade even a conscientious scribe with his mind on lectionary needs to decide on the fuller form. It does not affect the sense so much and it can hardly be denied that "Jesus Christ, Son of God" gives an added rhetorical and solemn emphasis. Such an argument of course is not necessary if the fuller form is the original reading. In support of the verse as a whole is its suggestion of being a kerygmatic form - it represents the beginning of the gospel which proclaims Jesus Christ. Mark is the only gospel writer to

Russell, Mark, IBS, October 1985

use the word euaggelion in the heading to his gospel. Paul claimed "We preach Christ crucified." An examination of the structure reveals a focussing on the Passion as the climactical point of the gospel. Does Mark believe that the gospel as preached is "the power of God for salvation"? The form of the first verse would at least suggest a proclamation of Christ and why proclaim if results were not expected?

At which point in history, then, did Mark come to this decisive moment when he set down the first word of his gospel? Most scholars would agree on the period around 70AD but not all would agree about the place. Is it Galilee ("He goes before you into Galilee": Mark 16.7) and is Marxsen correct in claiming that Mark's theme is to say that Jesus is coming soon to meet his own people in Galilee? /2 Is this the complete message of Mark? What about material that does not appear to have any connection with such a theme? And why is there such reluctance to accept the church tradition expressed in the Anti-Marcionite Prologue that "after the departure of Peter himself, he (Mark) wrote down this same gospel in the regions of Italy" since there is no firm evidence to the contrary. This is not to deny the problems attached to such a tradition but there does not seem any decisive reason for refusing the possibility that genuine Petrine reminiscences are imbedded in the Marcan tradition and that Mark wrote the gospel at Rome. /3

That Mark should write a "gospel" at all does suggest that to some extent at least the hope of Jesus' coming back had receded into the background. He feels it now necessary to place some record in the hands of the church. If he is John Mark, he has waited a long time to do so

This reminds us that from time to time throughout the history of the church leaders may misunderstand and perhaps try to shape divine history after the pattern of their own thought. Mark shared the misunderstanding of his church. Here there is no claim to infallibility nor to understanding what the Holy Spirit is saying. Mark is forced by circumstances to recognize that he is mistaken. He cannot delay longer. The record must be committed to writing.

But there is something else, even more sobering than this.

The Neronian persecution has taken place. Tacitus sets out for us the appalling record of what happened to members of the Roman Church:

They were not only put to death but put to death with insult, in that they were dressed up in the skins of beasts to perish either by the worrying of dogs or on crosses or by fire, or when the daylight failed, they were burnt to serve as lights by night."

(Gwatkin's translation: Vol 1, p78)

Tradition, accepted by the church in the absence of other evidence, records that the two leading apostles, Peter and Paul, perished in this onslaught. This would be devastating for the mixed Gentile/Jewish church. It would not be surprising if the number of apostates was high. How many would be able to face up to the prospect of an agonizing death by fire or crucifixion or being torn apart by dogs, deliberately starved to make them more vicious?

The martyrdom of Peter and Paul at Rome and the tradition that emerged from it have every likelihood of having an historical basis. It is hardly necessary to underline how traumatic such a double disaster would have been for the church. It should be noted that from very early days, the concept of the believer being identified with his Lord in suffering and death appears to have loomed large. Paul seeks a share eg in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3.10); he seeks to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1.24). The first epistle of Peter talks of the vicarious suffering of Christ as an "example to the members of the church to follow his steps." (2.21f) Parallels have often been drawn between the account of Jesus' death and that of Stephen in Acts (ch.8), a striking example of identification. Part of our problem is the lack of any clear reference to the death of Peter and Paul in Mark's gospel. Whatever may have been the temptation to introduce a reference, Mark preserves the traditions of Jesus that he has received without any obvious embellishment. The pericope on fasting is an example. It has

to do with the death of Jesus and the fasting expressive of sorrow that belongs to that time. The present time with Jesus present is the time of joy. It is also the time of the presence of Peter, and the period of a wedding celebration: "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?.....The days will come when the groom is taken away from them. And then on that day they will fast" (2.19f) The verb apairō can imply a use of force. Jesus was "torn away" from the twelve and the church by the crucifixion. Similarly Peter (and Paul) shared this experience of being "torn away" by hostile authorities and martyred. The church in the aftermath of the persecution of 64AD knew something of the distress experienced at the time of the violent death of Jesus and it could take comfort in this identification. The disciples, represented in James and John, are assured that they will share the baptism (of suffering) Jesus underwent (10.39) - a verse that may have given rise to the tradition that James and John died together - but confirmed in the experience of Mark's church. When Mark ends his gospel with the words, "For they were afraid" (16.8), he is speaking of the women who fled from the tomb. This unusual ending has never been satisfactorily explained. Is it possible that Mark, when he stressed the "fear" by giving it an emphatic position, was addressing the Roman church as it had entered into the implications of the stunning news that Peter and Paul were martyred?

It is possible to assume, then, that the church at Rome had its own quota of those who, under the threat of torture, denied Christ. Like Peter they too had been guilty of desertion. They too had claimed that they had no knowledge of Jesus. It would be only natural for them to feel that Jesus would have nothing to do with them, that forgiveness could hardly exist in the face of such shameful actions nor any place they might have in the church. Is this why Mark makes a special point of describing the denial of Peter instead of avoiding it with the excuse that it would not do the church any good? But Mark does not attempt to lighten the ugly details. A glance at the account will show the build up to a climax when Peter curses and says specifically, "I do not know the man you are talking about." (14.71; previously he only denied that he belonged to Jesus' group). The curse inveighed on himself

serves to underline the seriousness of the denial. Mark may be saying: "You too have denied Christ. You feel he does not want you any more. Peter was like that. He felt so remorseful that he could not believe that Jesus would receive him back. Yet Jesus was ready to forgive. Wasnt that why he mentioned Peter specially? 'Tell Peter that I will meet him in Galilee.'" This then is how Mark addresses a church that has faltered and compromised and wriggled out of danger and is now filled with remorse, a church that desperately needed assurance that a new beginning was possible. This was how it was in "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ". The church would have an added encouragement. Peter who disowned his Lord shamefully, found the power of Jesus' forgiveness and renewal through the Holy Spirit and when in the time of rough and searching persecution he was called to face the ultimate challenge of death after the pattern of Jesus he did not fail.

In the interpretation given to the parable of the sower where we find clear reflections of the experience of the later church, it does speak of those who receive the word with joy, stick it for a time, then "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away." (4.17) This could reflect the actual experience of the church Mark addresses, of severe testing and apostasy. Indeed it is hardly appropriate to use "tribulation or persecution" of what we know of the disciples' experiences in the gospel traditions. The word "tribulation" (thlipsis) is almost a technical term for sufferings of the end-time. In the so-called "Little Apocalypse" (Mark 13) there are statements of general application but which, when placed in the context of the Neronian persecution - if the phrasing itself does not derive from it - take on a special thrust eg being delivered up to councils, standing before governors and kings for Jesus' sake, brother delivering up brother to death, the father his child, children rising up against parents and having them put to death. (9.12) Here is an example of the "sword" Jesus talked about, the hostility within the Jewish home against members of the family who follow Jesus whether son or daughter, brother or sister, son and father. The experiences of the OT saints are spoken of in similar

terms. They become forms of expression for the experiences of the early church, jargon bound up with the end-time. It would not be surprising if they recall some of the things that happened to the church in Nero's time. The rise of belief in a Nero redevivus shows what terror Nero created for the church in his time. And what about the mysterious phrase to bdelugma tēs erēmōseōs (The Abomination of Desolation), taken from Daniel, and expressing the nightmare of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, and entering into the tradition as indicative of antichrist and of the terror let loose on the world at the end time?

The theme of the gospel

It has been claimed that the theme of the gospel of Mark is: "The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God". assuming we punctuate with a full stop after "Son of God". /4 But other punctuations are of course possible. If, for example, a comma is inserted after "Son of God", "the beginning" may refer simply to the OT quotation: "Behold, I am sending my messenger before you...." It is interesting that Mark only rarely refers back to the OT. /5 Thus here his binding together of what God said in the past with Jesus and the Baptist can be of special significance. This in itself serves to bring out the stature of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as one whose destiny is in the hands of God, as someone within his plan which now begins to unfold. We may note the first line of the OT quotation: "Behold, I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way" Here we have God addressing Jesus in the period before history began ie there is a suggestion of pre-existence. /6 If this is accepted - and the statement of Jesus about his mission to preach, "For this reason I came out(exēlthon)" could serve to corroborate this view - then the position and pre-eminence of Jesus is further emphasized. If Mark goes out of his way to stress the uniqueness of Jesus, it need not be unrelated to the need to do so if the church feels Jesus has let it down.

But the quotation speaks of "my messenger before you". In Malachi the Hebrew runs "my messenger before me", where it would appear that to accommodate Jesus and his uniqueness even the OT authority is restricted. The forerunner goes ahead, not of God, but of Jesus. The equation of Jesus with

God implicit in this re-asserts validity and authority for Jesus where it has been questioned.

John the Baptist

Another line of approach may be mentioned that alters the interpretation. This is to treat the OT quotation as a parenthesis, applying the arche (beginning) to the appearance of the Baptist. The "beginning" is when John appeared "baptizing...and preaching". Is it possible to claim that John is included in the "beginning of the gospel"? The ambiguity of the position of the Baptist in the gospel accounts is familiar. Does he belong to the old dispensation and, therefore, what the Q source states - "He who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" - is true? (Lk 9.48; Matt 11.11) Or is he so closely identified with the coming of Jesus that he breaks through the Jew/Jewish Christian barrier? /7 Is there a growing appreciation or evaluation of the role of the Baptist? In Luke, for example, John appears to "preach the gospel" (euaggelizomai) to the people. Does the Greek word mean merely "to preach" or does it mean to "preach the gospel"?

It should not be forgotten that in Luke the same word is used of the proclamation of the angel Gabriel to Zachariah: "I was sent...to bring you this good news" (Lk 1.19) and, again, of the angel to the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people." (2.10) It is a word stamped upon the whole of Luke's twofold work, bringing an atmosphere of joy with it that spills over into the nativity chapters, reckless of any divisions Jew/Christian. The joy of the time of Jesus is retrospective and spans the two dispensations. It might be worth exploring why Luke leaves out the noun euaggelion, gospel. And, equally, why does Mark not use euaggelizomai? Matthew has only one occurrence of euaggelizomai which he borrows from Q (11.5; Lk 7.22). But those who "bring good tidings," apart from Jesus and the Baptist, are in Luke angelic beings. Thus the baptist is placed alongside the angels and shares in the proclamation of the good news. (Lk 1.19; 2.10; 3.18). Here the high position of the baptist is stressed and, further, his sharing in the proclamation of Jesus is secured for, when Jesus opens his ministry, he speaks of the Holy Spirit that he anointed him to "preach the good news" (4.18)

The heightening of the Baptist's role is further confirmed by Matthew where the summary of his preaching is given in precisely the same terms as that of Jesus' preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (3.2; 4.17) where the Baptist, it is claimed, "becomes a preacher of the Christian congregation." /8

Finally, in the fourth gospel, John's description is that of "witness", one who sees for himself the Spirit descend on Jesus (unlike the synoptic accounts though Matthew leaves the matter open) and one who can speak of Jesus' death in unusual and cryptic terms as "the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world" and who becomes such an effective witness of the Christian congregation that two of his own disciples, pointed by the Baptist to Jesus, follow him. Thus it would appear that within the gospel tradition, John tends more and more to be identified with the Christian tradition, and yet at the same time there is an awareness that claims for the Baptist by his own disciples that he is the Christ may make John more than a mere forerunner (John 1.20 implies this). It does appear that there is a more than normal concern in the fourth gospel to spell out the position of the Baptist in relation to Jesus and yet at the same time to christianize him. Such a paradoxical position belongs also to the OT saints for the church eg Abraham, David and Moses as types of Christ and yet not Christian.

If then the Baptist has a distinctive yet ambiguous role within the gospel tradition, how does he fit in to the total theme of the gospel as response to a life or death situation? I suppose we must be wary of finding what we want to find in this instance but bearing in mind that when Mark wrote John was dead and the manner of his death familiar and this had been handed down in oral tradition, the church must have pondered long and hard about John's exact position in relation to the Christian tradition and to the death of Christ. This would be especially the case if some of John's disciples formed part of the basis of the followers of Jesus. /9

First of all, the description of John is "forerunner" ie he is forerunner of one who is to be crucified. While the description is taken from the OT, it need not only derive from there. Is there not some sense in which the "forerunner" can imply some identification with the one who is to follow? It should be remembered that the position given to the Baptist is a Christian interpretation, not a Jewish one though no doubt

some Jews, especially those who have responded to John, could hardly fail to think of John in terms of the divine messenger of Malachi. /10 The summary of the baptist's message in Mark is very terse indeed. It may indicate a certain shaping in the preaching or teaching of the church. A natural question by members of the church would relate to the difference between John and Jesus and one line of reply would be that John baptized with water but Jesus is to baptize with the Holy Spirit. The baptist, by acknowledging Jesus as the Mightier One, would further confirm this. Of course it can be understood as a playing down of the role of the baptist by the church and we are faced again with the dilemma as to whether the baptist esteemed Jesus as highly as Christian tradition has it or is this merely a construction of a church on the defensive?

While Mark mentions such a prophecy, he does not. Unlike Luke and the Fourth Gospel, mention the fulfilment ie the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This marks the climax of Jesus' work after crucifixion and resurrection - he bestows the Holy Spirit. (cf Acts 2.33; John 20.22). The thoughtful member of the congregation who listened to the reading of this passage in worship would assume the whole context of this promise. Indeed he would be experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit as he worships. Behind the presence of the Holy Spirit is the assurance that Jesus is alive, that God had not failed his promise. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee that God has not forsaken them in their broken, remorseful and disheartened state.

We turn to look again at the passage on fasting and the removal of the bridegroom in chapter two, vss 18-20. It forms one unit in an artificially constructed section on the theme of conflict ie between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. If we take our passage as a type of pronouncement story, then the emphasis is on the death of Jesus and the sorrow (fasting) that will follow. /11 It is placed in the context of fasting as practised by John's disciples and the Pharisees. It is possible that the early church tended to add details to a construct on conflict. In a grouping of units to explain why it was Jesus had to die, concentration on the party chiefly responsible would be natural. Difficulty, for example, is found in trying to account for the Pharisees in the

cornfields (2.23-28). Indeed "Pharisees" especially in Matthew become an umbrella term for such authorities. Evidence of unthinking adjustment to parallel John's disciples with the Pharisees is suggested by the quite unprecedented phrase "disciples of the Pharisees" on the pattern "the disciples of John". How far can we ascertain any conflict in the synoptic gospels between the baptist and his disciples? The uncertain subject of erchontai kai legousin (They come and say) which can be impersonal or can awkwardly refer to "the disciples of John and the Pharisees" does suggest some meddling with an original text. If the Pharisees are left out, we have a straight contrast between John's disciples and those of Jesus. The disciples of John fast in mourning for their leader. Later when the "bridegroom" is snatched away, ie the crucifixion takes place, the disciples will mourn. It is possible, then, that as the Roman authorities, represented in Nero, brought about the persecution of the church, so Pharisees as representative of the Jewish authorities and the real force behind the condemnation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin are introduced to create a conflict unit. /12

It is also notable that we have a most awkward combination in 3.6, a verse that concludes the section on conflict where we have the Pharisees and Herodians combining in a plot against Jesus. Is this so improbable a combination that it must be true or is it an impossible combination? Is the writer - perhaps pre-markan - trying to express awkwardly and improbably that a variety of hostile forces were opposed to Jesus and prepared to kill, just as Herod executed the Baptist? Herodians are not mentioned in this collection of conflict stories but the arrest of the baptist is mentioned in 1.14. Whatever may be the explanation, to a church living continually under the threat of execution like Jesus, among whose ranks many have died, this unit could be a source of strength and re-assurance.

In chapter six we have inserted immediately after the disciples are sent out on mission and before their return a section that is not always appreciated, the story of Herod, Herodias and John (14-29) /13 It is however interesting to note some parallels that are worth recording. While Jesus is rejected by his own people at Nazareth (6.1ff) John is rejected by Herod (cf 6.14,26). Jesus who steadfastly

follows the will of God is crucified unjustly while John who insists on keeping the law on marital relationships is beheaded. Both are at the mercy of the powers that be, whether Pilate or the puppet king, Herod. Unlike Jesus, however, the death of John appears to owe little to Jewish opposition.

The martyr church at Rome could not help but recognize features of Jewish stories about martyrs. /14 An examination shows a consistent framework in such tales. We have the prophetic figure, here described as "a righteous and holy man" (cf 20b). The prophet keeps steadfastly to the law and is imprisoned by the ruler or king (cf v17) Such a ruler may be under the influence of someone else eg his wife as Ahab to Jezebel and Herod to Herodias. As a result he becomes the instrument of his wife's hostility in securing the death of the prophet (cf v19) by a variety of means (v27). The prophet, however can be vindicated of the respect shown by John's disciples to his corpse. /15 Thus the prophet or martyr can oppose the authorities, bearing witness to them as to what is right. They in turn react against the prophet and can bring about his death. Echoes of the story of Ahab and Jezebel are apparent in the account, the latter, denounced by Elijah (baptist) seeks to destroy him (1 Kings 19.1-8)

The whole section is wedged in, as has been pointed out, between the sending out of the twelve and their return to report (6.7-13, 30). Some explain the insertion as implying that the mission took a long time. /16 But is this the only explanation that suits? The mission of the twelve reflects the later mission of the church. At its very heart, its very centre, is persecution, even death. The baptist had proclaimed his message and the result is set down here. Mark gives us a salutary lesson. This is no soft task but a task fraught with risk. In the post-neronian period the examples are many and of the twelve one has defected while two have become witnesses unto death.

Mark, or the source he uses, prefaces the account of John's death with a short section on the rumours that follow Jesus' mighty works (6.14-16) One report claimed Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead and the mighty works confirm this fact. This general report reminds us of the expectation in Jesus' time that a prophetic figure

at the end-time, is to be put to death and rise again. Is there then the implication that the baptist will rise from the dead? It is ironical that the one who put John to death can now claim that he has risen. But can this be isolated from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the close relationship of John with him? Here then John who is dead is spoken of as alive - death and resurrection.

Thus yet again the martyr church can listen to accounts that speak not only of death but of life, not only of despair but hope, not only of loss but of gain.

To euaggelion, The Gospel

But we have to remind ourselves that Mark, in all of this only speaks of the archē the "beginning" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He never tells us that the story is ended. Such a "beginning" can be referred to the action of God. It was God who began it all,

and he is with the church in the continued story whether it be in Rome or Ephesus or Jerusalem. Mark can include traditions that speak of new wine and new cloth. Since it is a new beginning, it makes what has gone before old. It is too early yet to describe the Taanach as an Old Testament but God is now present in strength in the new era. When the writer of the first epistle of John says: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen for ourselves and our hands have touched, I mean the word of life", he is making quite explicit that things began with Jesus. The Fourth gospel goes back in terms that recall the creation story to speak of the Logos who was in the beginning and was divine. Mark does not rise to such sublime heights but, in a tragic and desolating situation, he affirms that God made the beginning in the gospel and it is that gospel the church proclaims.

The description Mark gives to what he writes is euaggelion, "Gospel". In the distinctive sense it has in Paul it is probably a new coinage. The parallels in the secular world of "good news", especially linked up with the birth of a son to the Emperor or a celebration of a birthday have little to do with Pauline usage. The nearest link is probably the Hebrew verb basar (בָּשַׂר in Piel or Hithpael) as used in second Isaiah:

You who bring good tidings to Zion, Go up on a high mountain
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice
with a shout (40.9; cf also 60.6)

In Paul emphasis is laid on the act of proclamation. It is not too much to say that for Paul it was only gospel when preached. Much is made here of its application here to a piece of writing, that here for the first time we have a new literary form, a document of faith where the writer declares whose he is and whom he serves ie it is also a confession of faith. But of course it is a lectionary for the primitive church, a piece of evangelism, a catechism for the instruction of young converts. Yet, if the situation is such as we claim, it is a document to strengthen and comfort the church in a time of severe testing.

In the structure of the gospel of Mark we get the impression that it is running on rather breathlessly but once it reaches the story of the Passion, the pace slackens and there is time to stop and think and absorb. The sense of haste is partly created by the use of euthus "immediately" and at times when it appears to be redundant. It is notable, too, how many occurrences are concentrated into the first chapter and diminish in a rather striking way in the rest of the gospel. Is this Mark's way of calling attention to the Passion, that, while what he writes throughout he feels is important, the story of the Cross is pre-eminent? Mark is, in effect, doing in writing what Paul does in proclamation, "preaching the Cross". This is not to deny an inner dynamic in what Mark writes but the central, focal point is the crucifixion.

The phrase, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" is unique within the gospels or rather within the two gospels that use euaggelion. In the four instances that occur in Matthew, three are found with the word "preach" (kērussō), and the additional phrase "of the kingdom" (cf 4.33 (Mk 1.14); 9.35; 24.14). In all cases in Matthew, the word "preach" is present ie it is the "gospel preached" (cf 26.13). Among the phrases unique in Mark besides 1.1 are "gospel of God" (1.14) which Matthew replaces with "kingdom"; the absolute use in 1.14, "believe in the gospel" (1.15); in two phrases where "gospel" and "Jesus" appear to be equated ie "for my sake and the gospel's" (8.35; 10.29) Luke almost invariably

prefers the verb euaggelizomai "preach the good news", a term which is located in, and binds together, the old and new dispensation and, as a verb, emphasizes the active or dynamic aspect. In Acts we find two uses of euaggelion but with other phrases ie ho logos tou euaggeliou ("the word (or "preaching") of the gospel" (15.7) and "bore testimony (diamarturasthai) to the gospel of the grace of God" (20.24)). Is it possible that Luke avoids the absolute use of euaggelion in case it may give rise to a misunderstanding about its dynamic character, thus he adds in logos to make this "the preaching of the gospel" while in the other of course we have the word "bore testimony" ie to the gospel of God's grace. Whatever may be the explanation, Luke does not use one single instance from Mark of e'aggelion. Does he find it incongruous, a reading back of a term that only emerges later?

One view that is still held is that Mark is influenced by Paul on occasions when writing his gospel. This is not to claim any extensive influence of Paul but on occasions it remains plausible eg the potted kerygma in the passion sayings (8.31;9.31;10.33), the idea of ransom (10.45) and of covenant (14.24). It is possible also to see the influence of Paul in the kerygmatic structure of the gospel itself especially the dominance of the Passion. Does Mark owe his use of euangelion to a deliberate recall of Paul? Or is the word traditional (Cf R. Pesch, Das Markus Evangelium, Vol 1, pp104f) ? The outline in the passion sayings includes suffering (8.31;9.12), rejection and death (8.31;9.31). It is notable that Mark waits until nearer the Trial to spell it out in considerable detail. Does he detail it in this way because in some way it parallels the experience of the Roman church?

The gospel and Demonic spirits

It is not our purpose to consider in detail the gospel in relation to demonic spirits. That the words of Jesus had authority and power is given its context in the baptism of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descends on (or "into") him.

If the church wavered in its view of Jesus because of what it suffered, leading to doubts about him and the claims made for him, if there was a crisis of faith, the assertion of Jesus' pre-existence, the OT prophecy pointing to him, and the further

confirmation through the voice from heaven can be seen as deliberate reassurance. He is the beloved Son, the suffering servant, the one on whom God's attestation in Isaiah 42.1f asserts: "I have put my Spirit upon him."

This Jesus comes into contact with demonic forces in the desert as one who is endowed with the Holy Spirit. He is greater than the demonic forces that dwell there with the wild beasts and, in the battle against Azazel and his hordes, Jesus' triumph is underlined when we read of the angels' constant ministrations. It reminds us of the saying of Jesus recorded in Q, "If I by the finger of God (= Lk; Mt has "Spirit of God". One would have expected Luke to use the latter) expel demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12.28), or of what Jesus said when the seventy came back from their mission and reported the subjection of the demons: "I saw Satan fall as lightning to the ground" (Luke 10.18).... "I have given you authority (power) to tread on serpents and scorpions", the latter presumably symbols of malign spirits. Mark prefers the term dunamis, "work of power" for such exorcisms ie Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit engages with powerful unclean spirits (as Mark prefers to describe them) and is triumphant. Such unclean spirits with their supernatural insight identify for the persecuted church the person of Jesus as "Holy One of God" (1.24) or "Son of God" (3.11). To the church at Rome which saw mighty demonic forces at work destroying their community, such stories would come with comfort and reassurance.

With force of arms we nothing can, full soon were we downriden

But for us fights the proper man whom God himself hath bidden.

Ask ye who is the same? Christ Jesus is his name

The Lord Sabaoth's Son; he, and no other one,

Shall conquer in the battle.

Whether we are to explain the overcoming of the demons in any ultimate sense as taking place in the wilderness when Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, overcomes them (Cf E. Best, The Temptation and the Passion (Cambridge 1965) pp190f et alia) or whether we are to see this battle as continuing throughout Jesus' ministry and climaxed in the Cross (cf G.B. Caird, Principalities and Powers, (Oxford 1956) pp70f) whose meaning, according to Aulen, is that

victory has taken place over evil powers, it remains that such a demonstration of power over evil forces is bound up with the person of Jesus. He is the mightier one who binds up Satan.

In an Ulster situation, evil assumes such an intractable form, that often people think of something more than the sin of wicked men and women - the work of evil powers. It can be difficult to understand why evil gets away with it, as would appear, and why such tragedies as that of Mexico City, like the storm on the lake, could not provide more evidence of divine control. The lengthy story of the Gadarene demoniac need not be merely a dramatic story but a way of emphasizing that, however multiplied may be the demonic forces arrayed against the church, however devastating their effect upon the human personality, the power of expulsion and of transformation still lies in the authority of Jesus and that in spite of paganism at its most evil and terrifying.

The believing community at Rome we can surmise had its own considerable portion of defectors. It may have been expressed all sorts of ways, giving up membership of the community and so not being brought before the authorities; keeping their identity secret; clearing out altogether in an act of sheer panic and yet wanting back; under the strain of torture and its physical agony to reach breaking point and willy-nilly denying Christ; perhaps there were those within the community who betrayed others to the authorities for gain, a pagan son his Christian father or a pagan mother her converted daughter, utterly resentful of her leaving the pagan gods. The list of failures could be multiplied. The unit on the sin without forgiveness could meet such a situation: "All sins and transgressions will be forgiven" - what a sweeping statement! Then the salutary finish: "but the sin against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven" (Mk 3.28-30) Many of those who had failed had never lost their faith in Christ. If in a moment of agony and stress, they lost their true identity in an involuntary denial, they had never in their hearts lost touch with Christ. Perhaps there were those who thought that there was no acceptance for them. Their sin was too great, too heinous. It can apply to the early church at Rome, at Jerusalem, at Ephesus,

or whatever. Thus Mark woos back the sad, dispirited and remorseful members of the church.

The reflections on our theme could be enlarged. We could show how Mark comforts the church whose proclamation of the gospel was again and again confronted with failure eg the seed growing secretly or the mustard-seed parables, the rejection at Nazareth, the purpose of the parables in stiffening opposition. It could be shown how slow the disciples were to confess Jesus as the Christ, how weak and wayward they were until the resurrection transformed them through the Holy Spirit and that beyond the limits of Mark's gospel. Who is theios anēr who can multiply bread for all the needs of the church, who can calm their fears in the worst of storms, who, when evil has done its worst, is raised from the dead but the one who is with the church in its hour of crisis but the Jesus Christ whom the church proclaims and who continues with them in the omnipresence of his risen power? Even when he hangs helpless on the Cross, the pagan centurion had to say: "Truly this was a(the) Son of God"?

Notes

1. The initial impetus to this theme was a sermon written for Townsend Presbyterian church in 1975 from which the thoughts on the theme multiplied.
2. Cf W. Marxsen, Introduction to the NT (ET), London 1968, 142;
3. For the evidence, cf D. Guthrie, NT Introduction, London 1965 ad loc.
4. For the textual problem, see E.M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT, UES London 1971, p73
5. Commented on by E. Schweizer in W. Telford (Ed), The Interpretation of Mark, SPCK, 1985 p44
6. Cf W Grundmann, Das Evangelium nach Markus, THK, Berlin 1968 ad loc.
7. H. Conzelmann in his The Theology of Luke(ET)., London 1960 makes Johr belong to the time of old dispersion, basing his view on one interpretation of Luke 16.16, a view which has aroused considerable criticism

Notes (Continued)

8. G. Bornkamm in Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew(ET), London 1960, p15
9. The case is over-stated in W. Wink,, John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition Cambridge 1968 but is still is, to some extent, valid.
10. Cf Josephus, Antiquities (XVIII,5.2) for his references to John; also Charles H. Scobie, John the Baptist, London 1964, pp17-22.
11. Is there a possibility here that fasting has to do with sorrow for failing to rise to the challenge of the Baptist, for not being sufficiently identified with him?
12. There does seem to be a deliberate attempt in Matthew to make the Pharisees the real centre of conflict eg changing the descriptions of the authorities in Mark after to "Pharisees" (Cf Matt ch.23)
13. The gap between the arrest of the Baptist (1.14) and the account of his death is lengthy. Did Mark seek to give it a more central position, not too far from the passion to make the parallel clearer? Mark does some skilful structuring. Chapter three is an especially striking example.
14. Cf J. Gnilka, Die Verstockung Israels. Isaias 6.9-10 in der Theologie der Synoptiker, StAnt 3, München 1961, pp 84-87; also R. Pesch, Das Markus-Evangelium, Vol 1 (Herder), Freiburg 1977 ad loc
15. Pesch, op.cit. 338f
16. So E. Schweizer, The Good News according to Mark,(ET), London 1970 p132