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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Sermon for St. Mark's Day.

Rev. Prof. E. Best.

The Mark whom we celebrate today is the author of the second gospel, the first to be written. Whether this Mark is identical with the Mark who forsook Paul and Barnabas when the going got tough (Acts 13:13) or with the Mark whose greeting Peter conveys in his letter (1 Peter 2:13) is neither here nor there. If this and one or two other references to 'Mark' in the New Testament was all there was to remember him by we would not be celebrating him today. This day is dedicated to the author of the Gospel according to Mark. What then was the measure of his achievement? To get at this we must first think of the church in which he wrote his gospel.

The Christian community in Rome for which he wrote had existed for at least twenty years before he wrote. Paul's letter to it shows that it was already a strong community, and Paul wrote twelve or thirteen years before Mark. From its beginning stories about Jesus must have been current among its members; they would have been brought to Rome by those who first founded the church there, possibly traders from Palestine. Others who came later would have added to the stock of stories. Among such would have been Simon Peter and we probably owe to him many of the stories in the Gospel in which he features. All the stories would have been told and retold in the community. Because Rome was far away from Palestine many details irrelevant to the Roman Christians would have been dropped. Who in Rome cared in which Palestinian village Jesus healed a leper or told the parable of the sower? What was important was that he had done so. Geographical data were forgotten, as were also the names of those Jesus healed; in the Gospel they are mostly nameless. Details of time also disappeared for it was not important to Christians in Rome whether Jesus healed a particular person or told a particular parable in March or in October. So the introductory phrases in Mark's gospel rarely give us any clue as to when things happened. Most incidents are linked to what precedes or follows by a simple 'and' or 'and immediately (forthwith)'. Losses of detail in respect of time, place and name are then what we would expect, especially in a community which passed on its stories by word of mouth and lived

far away from where the events had taken place. But the absence of such details clearly creates problems for anyone who wishes to put them together.

Mark's first achievement was to find a way of putting the separate stories together, though some were already joined. Apparently people had begun to group together incidents of similar nature. So you find in Mark's fourth chapter a number of parables brought together; it is unlikely that Jesus told all of his parables at the same time. There are also little collections of stories in which Jesus is engaged in controversy with Jewish leaders (2:1 - 3:6) and of his miracles (4:35 - 5:43). Yet controversies and miracles cannot have been restricted to a few days in Jesus' life. Anyway these and a large number of other unconnected incidents had to be placed in relation to one another. Of course some of them had a natural position. You couldn't have the death of Jesus anywhere other than near the end of the story and you couldn't put his baptism anywhere other than near the beginning. But given these two fixed positions there is a tremendous amount of material which could be placed in a number of different positions.

How was Mark to give this a shape, to put it in order? He hadn't the information to give it chronological order, which is what we would naturally expect. He has in fact chosen to unify his material in such a way that it divides into three main sections with a prologue and an epilogue. Prologue and epilogue suggest that a better word than sections for what lies between them would be 'Acts', as in the acts of a drama. What he ends up with can be regarded both as biography and drama.

The prologue (1:1-15) is brief but crammed with material. Mark commences by quoting texts from the Old Testament so that we understand that the story he is telling does not begin with Jesus or his birth (remember that Mark's readers knew something of his earthly origin) but with a plan that God has been working out through his people, the Jews. All through his book we find Mark harking back to bits of the Old Testament as if to indicate that what happens to Jesus, especially his death, is not chance but part of God's plan. Mark next introduces a strange figure, John the

Baptist, whom we know about from other Jewish writings. But he doesn't tell us much about him; just enough to relate him to Jesus. He baptises with water but Jesus will baptise with Holy Spirit. And straightway we're told how Jesus is equipped with the Holy Spirit; you cannot give to others what you yourself do not have. Jesus comes to John, is baptised by him and the Holy Spirit comes down on him like a dove. Oddly from our point of view Mark tells us nothing about what brought Jesus to John; was he inspired by John's preaching? Was he looking for a role in life to which he might devote himself? We don't know and Mark does not give us time to speculate. He drives us on from the baptism to a contest between Jesus and the devil. If the devil is opposed to Jesus and Jesus is trying to carry out God's will then the devil must try to stop Jesus. Two brief verses tell us about the contest but don't tell us anything about the nature of the temptation as do Matthew and Luke and tell us nothing about their result; we are left to deduce from what follows that the devil has not been able to stop Jesus. For Jesus begins to preach about the Kingdom of God, a Jewish term. To describe the prologue has taken me a few minutes; Mark got it all into fifteen verses, obviously a writer who is not going to waste words.

That is the end of the prologue and strictly speaking if this was a drama the curtain would come down and there would be a brief pause. But it is not being acted out on a stage so we go directly to the next incident which flows out of the last: Jesus has preached; will his preaching have any effect? We see at once that it does. He goes to four fishermen and calls on them to follow him and they do. Now we are launched into the first Act.

There is no time to look at this Act (1:16 - 8:26). It is crammed full of activity on the part of Jesus. He heals, he teaches, he moves from one place to another. Crowds are drawn to him; Jewish leaders begin to show their opposition. Everything takes place at breakneck speed. Again and again as Mark drives to story forward he writes of one incident as following immediately on top of another. His favourite way of uniting events is with the word 'immediately' (or 'forthwith' or something similar; English translations differ). Two impressions are left; as I have said, the

furious activity of Jesus (who then can he be?), and in addition a strange inability on the part of his closest followers to understand what he is about. They are puzzled yet they don't leave him. So Mark show him as an extraordinary person from whom we may expect great things. But it works out very differently.

The second Act (8:27 - 10:52) is of a different kind altogether. If the first had speed and lacked real structure the second has structure but moves more leisurely. We are now made to think about Jesus and what he is about. The structure is that of a journey. It begins with Jesus as far away from his own area as possible, out in pagan Caesarea Philippi. Mark traces a journey which Jesus makes as he moves south from there through Galilee, along the Jordan through Jericho and up to Jerusalem. On this journey Jesus teaches his disciples about himself and about how they are to be disciples. It is no chance that this takes place on a journey; it is a kind of pilgrimage; Mark draws this out by continually referring to Jesus as being on the way or on the road at the head of his disciples.

But what does Jesus teach his disciples about himself? Chiefly what is going to happen to him; he says it three different times: 'I am going to be delivered into the hands of men that they will kill me; and when I am killed, after three days I will rise'. This is to happen in Jerusalem, hence the journey is a journey to that city. We can see by now how the end of the story is beginning to dominate what precedes it. The three predictions that Jesus makes of what is going to happen to him are brief; they don't need to be lengthy. Mark's readers already know the full story and what is going to happen when Jesus reaches Jerusalem. So he doesn't waste time on unnecessary details.

But each time Mark gives one of the predictions he goes on immediately to drive home its implications for the disciples. If he is about to take up his cross than they must take up theirs. If he is not about to demand his rights as a true leader of the Jewish people and so be saved by God from humiliation, they too must learn what it means to be humble and he sets before them a child and tells them that their behaviour should resemble the child's. If he is king of the Jews and does not assert his kingship with worldly authority

then they must learn that the ideal for them is not ruling over people but serving others as a slave does.

Now we have reached Jerusalem and the third Act.(11:1 - 15:47). It is strange that Jesus has not been to Jerusalem before this. In the Gospel of John he makes a number of visits before the final visit when he is put to death. A number of visits would be natural for Jerusalem was both the political and the religious capital of the Jews. The temple, the centre of their faith, was there. Only in Jerusalem could the main Jewish festivals be celebrated or sacrifices be offered. Surely Jesus and his disciples went to some of these! Mark has shaped his use of the material so that Jesus only goes once to Jerusalem; this is the climax of his life, and it is his death.

If the second Act was structured as a journey with a list of places visited the third has a different pattern altogether. The whole takes place in six days and the days are spelt out. On the first he comes to Jerusalem, visits the temple, goes back to Bethany where he is staying. On the second he returns to Jerusalem and cleanses the temple; and so on through the rest of the week. But as we get near the end it is not sufficient just to apportion the events out in times of days; so much has to be fitted into the last twenty-four hours that they are marked out in briefer periods. After six p.m. on Thursday he and his disciples keep the Passover festival, he goes to the agony of Gethsemane, he is betrayed and arrested, put on trial, condemned. At daybreak he is sent to Pilate for another trial because the Jews have not the authority from the Romans to put criminals to death; at nine in the morning he is taken out and crucified; from twelve noon until three in the afternoon there are strange signs as he hangs on the cross; at three he dies. And we are at the end of a kind of countdown.

Now there is a break. It is the Sabbath and no-one can do anything. We come to the epilogue (16: 1-8): Jesus is laid in the tomb and the story pauses. Then comes Sunday morning and the women, who unlike the men have not deserted Jesus, go out to the tomb. It is empty but there is a messenger with a message: 'Go and tell his disciples and Peter (Peter is especially mentioned because

he has gone further than the other disciples in denying Jesus) that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you' (16:7, cf 14:28). And with that the story seems to tail off into nothing. The women in fear run away from the tomb and tell no one. Of course they must have told someone or we would not know the content of the message. The other Gospels all follow up the narrative of the discovery of the empty tomb with accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus to the women or to the disciples. Because we are used to the way the other Gospels end we expect something more from Mark; indeed in the second century some of those who expected more wrote new endings to the Gospel to include appearances of the risen Jesus. The Authorised Version provides one such account beginning at 16:9. Mark never wrote it, though there is no reason to doubt that accounts of such appearances would have been known in Rome; Peter, if no one else, would have recounted them.

Why then did Mark not include them? Such accounts tie down the activity of the risen Jesus to a limited number of discrete events. If there are appearances they have to be ended in some way and so in Luke's Gospel there is the ascension story. Has Jesus then left his church without his presence? In Acts there is no real sense of his continued presence. By omitting the appearance stories Mark has set Jesus free from being confined to a number of isolated appearances; he can now always be with his church. For Mark Jesus remains alive in the story he has told; he remains alive in his words and his actions and in his ability to draw men and women after him. The messenger at the tomb says Jesus has gone back to Galilee, that is to the place where the story began, and when we go back to the beginning of Mark's story we find Jesus there.

That's the story as Mark tells it though much abbreviated. But I believe it enables us to see it as a whole and to see that it sticks together; it is an artistic unity. Most modern biographies follow a chronological outline and their unity comes from the life they narrate. That Mark succeeded in creating an artistic unity can be seen in the way an actor like Alex McCowen can take the story and retell it in dramatic fashion in such a way as to fill theatres. The theatre succeeds in doing for Mark what the church ought to be

doing. The church breaks up the story in its teaching and its lectionaries and we lose the impact of the whole. Mark of course was not a great literary artist; his style is rather horrible by good Greek standards (the English of the A.V. is no clue to the quality of his Greek). But though story tellers in many oral cultures have never been great artists in that sense yet they have been able to narrate what they say in a way which has riveted their hearers. That is where Mark's artistry lies. Not that he would have been pleased with me for saying that one of his achievements was the creation of an artistic unity. He was planning a theological unity. But in the case of a narrative the two must go together and there is also a theological unity.

If Mark did not seek an artistic unity neither did he seek to set out for us material about the life of Jesus. Yet if he and the evangelists who followed him had not told their stories we would lack real detail on the life of Jesus. Paul tells us hardly anything about Jesus other than that he died and rose. He gives us only two or three of his sayings. We can see he knew more but that is only because we have the gospels to help us detect the more. The life of the church has then been infinitely enriched by what Mark has given us. Mark of course never dreamt the world would last another nineteen centuries after his death and he did not set out to preserve for posterity the stories about Jesus. But he did set them down and we have them and for that we shall be eternally grateful to him.

If we had been able to ask Mark what he was trying to do I'm not sure what he would have answered. Probably he would have drawn our attention to the word 'gospel' in his opening verse. The word was in use before his time; it described the content of sermons; those who delivered them preached the gospel. There were a whole lot of short statements setting out the gospel for there were many ways of proclaiming it. Perhaps the best known is the brief creed in which Paul educated the Corinthians and which he said others had taught him: 'Christ dies for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and he appeared to Cephas (i.e. Peter), then to the twelve' (I Cor. 15: 3-5). In a way this is a kind of narrative but it is also a series of theological statements. Many people must have

been dissatisfied with its brevity. Who was this Jesus who features in it? Why did he die? Do the things he said and did cohere at all with the way he died? Mark tells the story of Jesus in such a way as to make his life explain his death. He is not a ghost figure or a theologian's speculation but a real person who did not just die loving people but loved and cared for them throughout all his life. What Mark has done has been to make the life of Jesus as much as his death and resurrection a part of the gospel. His book is not only biography and drama but also sermon. It does not begin with his death and its significance for sin but with a living human being. I was once talking about this with a knowledgeable Maori from New Zealand. He said to me, 'When the missionaries first came to us they told us about sin and how Christ had died for us and we did not listen for we did not know what sin was; then they told us about Jesus and we became Christians'. Because of Mark the life of Jesus belongs to the gospel as much as his death and resurrection.

But Mark has another achievement to his credit. In what I have called Act II he created a journey to Jerusalem in which Jesus spoke of his fate and linked what was going to happen to him to the way his disciples should live. In that way Mark made our understanding of the Christian life depend on our understanding of Jesus. Now undoubtedly Paul had related the two but because he never tells us much about the earthly life of Jesus he is never able to draw this out effectively. Mark has shown us that for our lives we have an example, not just an example of courageous death in obedience to God's will, for Paul showed that, but a life lived in obedience and full of incident, of care for others and of penetrating instruction. Without Mark and the evangelists who followed him the imitation of Christ would never have been a real possibility.

I return to the end of Mark's story. As I've said it's a peculiar ending. You don't quite understand it, nor do I. But it forces me to go back and read the whole thing again in the hope that I might understand it better. And may Mark not have intended this? When we come to the end we have neither understood Jesus properly nor have we understood ourselves and what Jesus is asking of us. All through the gospel the disciples have been failing in just these respects, and dare we claim to be any better? We are not different

from them. They must have relived over and over again in their minds how they had been with him and had not grasped what he wanted of them. They had not only failed to understand; they had failed him by running away at his arrest and by denying him. Hence the final message: Go and tell his disciples and Peter. It is a message also for us when we fail him as we do. We may have dropped back as it were in our following of him but he summons us to pick up again our discipleship for he goes before us into Galilee; going on before us leading us in the mission of the church which he has left to us and being always with us while we have and read Mark's Gospel.

E. Best