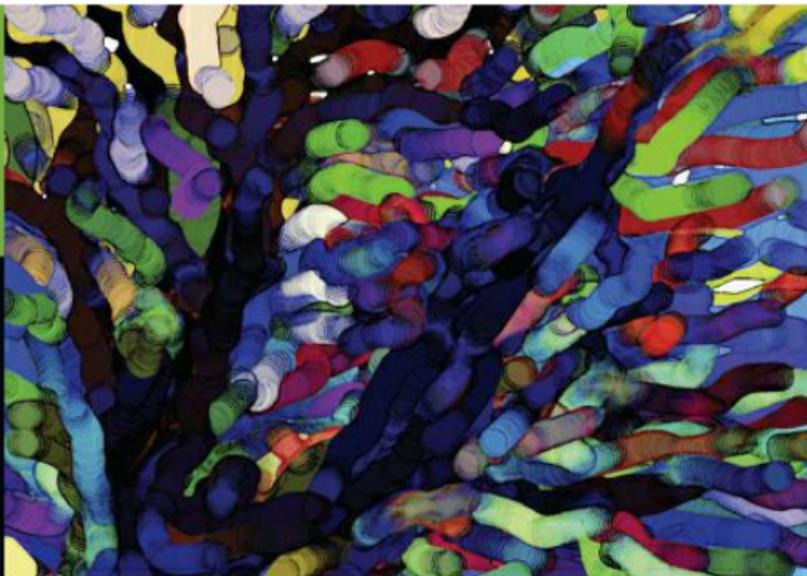


T
H
E

B
I
B
L
E

S
P
E
A
K
S

T
O
D
A
Y



DONALD ENGLISH

The Message of **Mark**

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of Mark

The mystery of faith

Donald English

formerly General Secretary, Home Mission Division of the Methodist Church of Great Britain

Series editors:

J. A. Motyer (OT)

John Stott (NT)

Derek Tidball (Bible Themes)



www.ivpress.com/academic/

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
E-mail: email@ivpress.com

© Donald English 1992

Study guide by J. Bramwell © 1992 by Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at www.intervarsity.org.

The Scripture quotations quoted herein are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd. All rights reserved. “NIV” is a registered trademark of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790. Distributed in North America by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

ISBN 978-0-8308-9794-0 (digital)
ISBN 978-0-8308-1231-8 (print)

General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

For Carol and Maxine

Author's preface

I am particularly grateful for the privilege of writing an exposition of Mark's gospel for *The Bible Speaks Today series*. The gap between many scholarly commentaries and much devotional literature is a serious one which does damage to our understanding of the Bible. I warm to the threefold ideal set out in the General Preface. It requires rigorous study of the biblical text, a study which faces the difficulties involved and is open to questions that have to be asked. Yet it also recognizes that Scripture was not given by God as a subject only for academic study. It is the story of God's grace and righteousness revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ. As such it calls for more than serious study—it invites a response of faith and a life lived that is appropriate to that faith. Scholarship and devotion ought not to be alternatives. Each needs the other.

Mark's gospel fits very aptly into such an approach. At first sight it is a simple account of the ministry of Jesus, with lots of stories, plenty of action, a large amount of human interest, and some very straight and searching statements, mostly from Jesus himself. Yet a serious reading of this gospel raises all kinds of questions. If Jesus is what the Christian church says he is, why doesn't he make more of it in the gospel, do more to press people into believing it, go out of his way to make it easy for the crowds to believe? And why, on the other hand, with so much evidence in front of them, did people find it so hard to see who he was, and to commit themselves to God through him? Why is the steady progress of good deeds by Jesus matched by a growing resistance to all he stood for? Why do his disciples find it so difficult to believe and understand, when it all seems so clear to us?

There are also technical questions about the origin of Mark's gospel, about the aims of Mark in writing it, about the construction, and about the contents and why they are arranged as they are.

Bible study has nothing to fear from questions like this. If it is about truth then the questions must be asked. But the attitude with which the questions are asked is important too. The books of the Bible are written 'from faith to faith'. They are not meant to be an almanac of all available knowledge. Neither are they written simply to stimulate academic interest. Nor do they reveal their treasures to the cynic. An openness to the truth is required if the truth is to be perceived and received. This theme is central to Mark's gospel.

I first came to this gospel as a young Christian, and was struck by its forthrightness, and by the picture of Jesus it contained. Later as a preacher, and as a Travelling Secretary with the UCCF (in the days when it was the Inter-Varsity Fellowship) I found it was the gospel to which, again and again, I referred those interested in faith, or newly into faith. Later still, as a theological college lecturer, I found myself expounding Mark and facing some of the deeper questions this gospel raises. I wrote, at the invitation of the World Methodist Council, six short studies, for use around the world.

This exposition is the next step in a journey of exploration, a journey which never fails to reveal more than I had discovered before, and to promise even more if I am willing to look beyond what is obvious and to allow it to speak to my own life and setting. It will be evident that I still have a long way to go, but I am grateful for the personal enrichment that has come from producing this book.

The Faculty, led by Dean Jim Waits, and students of Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, provided an excellent context of devotion and study which enabled the major part of the writing of the book to be completed. I express warmest thanks to them.

I am deeply grateful to Mrs Eva Scrivener and Miss Jan Dale for their patient typing and re-typing of the manuscript; to Frank Entwistle and Colin Duriez with their colleagues on the IVP staff; and to the New Testament Editor John Stott, whose eye for detail misses very little, and yet who never loses sight of the larger scene.

Lastly I am in debt to all those who over the years have helped me understand the Bible more sensitively and to perceive depths and heights which I might have missed without their fellowship. My prayer is that others will be inspired in the same way by this exposition.

DONALD ENGLISH

Abbreviations

GNB The Good News Bible (NT 1966, 4th edition 1976; OT 1976).

NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946; 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).

Bibliography

- Anderson, Hugh, *The Gospel of Mark* (New Century Bible Commentary; Oliphants, 1976; Marshall, Morgan & Scott/Eerdmans, 1981).
- Best, Ernest, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (T. & T. Clark, 1983).
- Blanch, Stuart, *Encounters with Jesus* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).
- Cole, R. A., *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Tyndale Press, 1961; 2nd edition Inter-Varsity Press, 1990).
- Cranfield, C. E. B., *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959).
- Davies, John D. and Vincent, John, *Mark at Work* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 1986).
- Denney, James, *The Death of Christ* (1902; revised and abridged by R. V. G. Tasker; Tyndale Press, 1951).
- Dunham, Maxie, *The Gospel of Mark* (Cokesbury, 1988).
- English, Donald, *Discipleship the Hard Way—Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Methodist Church, Home Mission Division, 1977).
- English, Donald, *The Meaning of the Warmed Heart* (Methodist Church, Home Mission Division, 1987).
- Gould, Ezra, P., *The Gospel according to St Mark* (International Critical Commentary, T. & T. Clark, 1896, reprinted 1983).
- Guy, H. A., *The Gospel of Mark* (Macmillan/St Martin's Press, 1968).
- Hargreaves, John, *A Guide to St Mark's Gospel* (TEF Study Guide 2, 3rd edition SPCK, 1979).
- Hooker, Morna D., *The Message of Mark* (Epworth, 1983).
- Martin, Ralph P., *Where the Action is* (Regal Books Division, Gospel Light Publications, USA, 1977).
- Martin, Ralph P., *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Paternoster Press, 1972).
- Marxen, Willi, *Mark the Evangelist*, translated by R. A. Harrisville (Abingdon Press, 1969).
- McGinley, Hugh (ed.), *The Year of Mark* (Deskbooks and the Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984).
- Moule, C. F. D., *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge University Press, 1965).
- Nineham, D. E., *The Gospel of St Mark* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries; Penguin, 1963).
- Robinson, J. M., *The Problem of History in Mark* (SCM Press, 1957; reissued in *The Problem of History in Mark and other Marcan Studies*, Fortress Press, 1982).
- Stott, John R. W., *Men With a Message* (IVP, 1954), published in the USA as *Basic Introduction to the New Testament* (Eerdmans/IVP, 1964).
- Swete, H. B., *The Gospel According to St Mark* (1898).
- Taylor, Vincent, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Macmillan, 1952).
- Weaver, Walter P., *Mark* (Basic Bible Commentary; Cokesbury, 1988).
- Williamson, Lamar, Jr., *Mark* (Interpretation—A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; John Knox Press, 1983).

Introduction

Our first question must be: ‘Why should we read Mark’s gospel at all?’ There is the obvious answer that it is there, and that we don’t want to miss anything. There is further the now widely accepted fact that Mark’s was the first of the New Testament gospels to be written, and was used by Matthew and Luke. But the other New Testament gospels are longer, and each has a more apparent distinctiveness—Matthew with the strongly Jewish background, Luke with his commitment to outcast groups, and John with the great I AM themes. What has Mark to offer by comparison with these?

It used to be thought that Mark was, by contrast, a simple, straightforward account of the story of Jesus, set out chronologically. That approach shouldn’t be wholly abandoned, since in broad terms it remains true. It also safeguards some important insights into Mark’s intention, not least the way in which he shows the shadow of the cross hanging over the ministry of Jesus from the very beginning.

Yet it is equally clear that Mark shows little interest in close or detailed historical linkage between one story and the next. Nor does he include material vital to a pure historian concerning Jesus’ ancestry, birth or childhood. It is not a biography of Jesus. What happened after the resurrection is largely omitted too, if, as will be suggested later, the original version of Mark’s gospel ended at Mark 16:8. He is equally free of pressure to provide exact geographical locations. Stories move from scene to scene without explanation. It is clear that something else concerns him much more. This ‘something else’ is the most important element in the introduction to the reading of the gospel itself. It uncovers the purpose of the writer and the prospect for the reader.

The best way to discover the intention of Mark is to read *his own expression of purpose*, wherever he has tried to make it plain. We can go on to examine *focal points of the teaching contained* in the gospel. What Mark emphasizes should help us to grasp his purpose more clearly. Then there is the task of *reading the stories* Mark tells, trying sympathetically to get into them, and to discern the reason for their presence in the gospel from within the account itself. Questions of *the materials on which Mark drew* are not unimportant, but they must not distract our attention from the texture of the gospel itself. We need to try also to *understand the people* who figure in the stories. They are important for a discovery of what the gospel is about. Other people are important, too. There are *those for whom the gospel was first written*. What we can know or surmise about their attitudes, experiences and needs will help us better to see how Mark’s gospel related to them. And *we must not forget ourselves* as we, under the inspiration of the same Spirit who led the writer, seek to be addressed by him through the Scripture as we take it up now.

The task is not a simple one. It has some of the characteristics of solving a mystery! But it is deeply challenging and spiritually rewarding for all who are willing to commit themselves to it. The element of commitment will be constantly present.

Mark’s purpose

There is no ambiguity here! The opening thirteen verses set it out with breathtaking clarity. 1

There is, first, the idea of ‘The beginning of the gospel’ (1:1). Something new is being launched. Much has been made of Mark’s use, for the first time, of gospel as a way of tabulating the good news (which is what ‘gospel’ means) in a written form. There is something more significant even than that, however. The word ‘gospel’ had a meaning prior to that of either ‘message’ or ‘written document’. It was originally used to describe ‘an epoch-making event’. For example, the birth of the future Emperor Augustus was described as ‘gospel’, meaning a happening which would change world history. Mark certainly offers gospel as good news. Equally clearly he is presenting it for the first time as a whole account in written form. Perhaps most important of all however he is announcing an event after which the history of the world will never again be the same.

At the centre of this event is Jesus Christ. Mark makes it clear that the person at the heart of his story establishes continuity with God’s previous activity in the world, hence the quotations from the Old Testament (1:2–3). There is also a testimony from John the Baptist, seen as the prophet promised in the Old Testament who would precede the coming of the Messiah—God’s anointed who delivers Israel (1:4–8). After John, if he is properly regarded in Old Testament terms, the next will be the Messiah.

This is precisely what the voice from heaven, during John’s baptism of Jesus, makes clear. The ‘You are my Son’ of 1:11 provides the closing bracket of the parenthesis which began with ‘the Son of God’ in 1:1. Mark could hardly be clearer about his view of who Jesus is.

We seem to be on the same track when Mark describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He announces nothing less than ‘the kingdom of God’. Because it has drawn, or is drawing, near, people must repent and believe the gospel (1:14–15).

This picture of the Messiah sent from God is made even more compelling by the demonstration, beyond words of preaching, in the miracles Jesus performed. For the first eight chapters of this gospel there is a quite breathless presentation of one work of power after another. Mark needs to keep using the word ‘immediately’ because he is hurrying his readers along from one example of the release of divine energy to the next.

If this gospel was written as some kind of training material for new Christians, or for early Christian evangelists, as some have suggested, then the evidence so far is clear and convincing. The powerful Son of God overcomes all problems brought to him. The kingdom of God is focused on him. Those who come to him in need are taught, healed and delivered. ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ (2:12), becomes the appropriate response.

It is much too simple a conclusion, however, to assume that Mark's sole intention is to portray Jesus as the powerful Son of God. It is probably not even his main purpose. The high Christology of the first thirteen verses, and the excitement of the miracles in the first eight chapters, are increasingly seen in Mark's gospel as the necessary preliminary to something else.

The first hint about that 'something else' comes at the outset of Jesus' preaching ministry as Mark records it. People are called not just to hear that the kingdom of God is imminent, but to do something about it. They should 'repent and believe the good news'. We are justified in picking up that theme also as the gospel unfolds. Mark is pointing us to a double thrust in his message. It is about *who Jesus is*. It is also about *how people should respond to Jesus*. *These two themes run right through the Gospel of Mark*. They form the basic materials for the telling of the story of Jesus.

Neither of those themes stays the same as the gospel unfolds. What is more, the development of each points us towards a more accurate definition of Mark's purpose.

Who Jesus is

There has been a long tradition of noting the significant change in the tone and direction of Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel after the accounts of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi 'You are the Christ' (8:27–30) and of the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2–13), where the emphasis is again on the identity of Jesus. 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' Before this time the concentration is on addressing the crowds, with attention to who Jesus might be. After it there is more concentration on training the disciples, and the focal point about Jesus is not who he is but what he has come to accomplish. This is particularly encapsulated in three repetitive passages (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). There is great value in that perception of the way Jesus lovingly helped his disciples towards the truth about himself and his vocation.

What has also to be recognized, however, and what is perhaps even more germane to Mark's purpose in gathering the material together in this way, is that these two stories (at Caesarea Philippi and on the transfiguration mountain) also make a significant change in the presentation of the two key themes so far: namely, who Jesus is, and how we should respond to him.

What is noticeable about the *identity of Jesus* is the striking alteration of strategy in his ministry, without any loss in its authority. From Mark 8 onwards Jesus goes steadily on to the confrontation with the religious authorities, speaking as he goes about the inevitability of suffering, rejection and death for himself. The all-powerful healer and miracle-worker suddenly becomes the one who submits to the fate of crucifixion (8:31, *etc.*), despite protests from Peter about such a course (8:32). He knows the pain that will be involved (14:32–42). He does not even defend himself against false evidence at his trial (14:61).

Yet at no point does Mark give any impression of Jesus being anything other than in total control of the situation. The contrast is not between a time of self-assured success, followed by a period of uncontrollable decline. Jesus walks from one phase to the other with determination and confidence. He predicts what will happen. We are given to feel that even at his trial he knows better than anyone else what is happening. The demonstration of power in the first half of the gospel, and the lowly path to the cross in the second are part of the one process of doing the will of his Father, part of the one way of being who he is and of doing what he came to do. They belong inextricably together. That will be a vital clue as we try to discern Mark's message about Jesus and the kingdom of God.

The same point is made in a different way if we consider the *titles used of Jesus* in Mark's gospel. The two most significant are 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man'.

The background of *Son of God* is in Old Testament passages like 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 2:7 and 89:26–27. It is used sometimes of Israel's kings and sometimes of the messianic king who will come to deliver God's people. When the title is used in Mark the reader has to decide in the context which use is the more likely. The accounts of the baptism of Jesus, the transfiguration, and the trial before the Sanhedrin require a messianic interpretation. The comment on the text will argue that the same is true when the demon-possessed cry out and call Jesus 'Son of God'. There may be something more subtle about the use of this title towards the end of the gospel. At the crucifixion of Jesus, the centurion in charge of the soldiers remarks, 'Surely this man was (the/a) Son of God'. Whichever translation we prefer, it may still be that the centurion had a much more earthy view of Jesus when he used such language. But Mark could be making a point which will come out even more clearly below, namely, that those who have eyes to see will perceive that the soldier's words were more meaningful than he knew. If so, then we are very near to the heart of Mark's gospel. But that is to jump ahead.

Alongside the use of Son of God is the more frequent use of *Son of Man*. The background in the Old Testament is again varied. In Psalm 8:4 it refers to humankind. In Daniel 7:1 it refers to a heavenly figure honoured by God. In Ezekiel it is the prophet's way of being addressed by God.

Mark makes clear that this is Jesus' favoured way of describing himself. It occurs in the gospel at a number of points which bring together the two titles or variations of them. In 8:29 Peter affirms Jesus as 'the Christ' (meaning 'the Anointed One', the Messiah). He is praised for the insight. It is a true perception. At once, however, when Jesus speaks of his future, he uses, not Messiah, but Son of Man, and he speaks of the necessary suffering which lies ahead. The title Son of Man, with its much more lowly connotations than Christ, Messiah, Son of God, is being used to interpret the others. When, at his trial, Jesus admits to being 'the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One', he goes on immediately to interpret that confession in terms of the future of 'the Son of Man'. When seeking to make abundantly clear to his disciples where the way forward lay in the work of salvation he had come to achieve, Jesus uses Son of Man language to communicate it (10:45). At the centre of the gospel are the three prophetic statements about his death, each cast in terms of 'Son of Man'.

To jump ahead once more, it is noteworthy that words about Jesus' future are accompanied by sayings about the nature of discipleship in the kingdom. Again we are moving nearer to the central purpose of this gospel, 'like master, like

servant’.

We come across the same emphasis by yet another route when considering the use of *kingdom of God* in Mark. Jesus begins by announcing that the kingdom is drawing, or has already drawn, near. The strong implication is that it has drawn near in him. As the story unfolds it becomes even clearer that he is the focal point of that kingdom. His power over disease, nature and demons celebrates the kingdom. He even assures people of divine forgiveness, to the chagrin of the religious leaders (2:1–12). People who show interest in coming to terms with the kingdom of God receive instruction in how to follow Jesus. Perhaps one can put it most accurately by saying that if he is not the king of the kingdom, since God is, he is at least the model of kingship. People can see in him God’s way of being king.

If the disciples in any way perceived that, and Peter’s affirmation at Caesarea Philippi suggests that they might have done so, then we can understand their horror, expressed in Peter’s words straight after his testimony to Jesus, at the thought of Jesus going to death in Jerusalem at the hands of others. His picture of the future did not coincide with theirs, even though he affirmed their view of him as the Christ, the Son of God. It was not that the titles were wrong. He was warning them against the accretions of centuries, whereby the Messiah was seen in terms of the model of kingship developed by earthly kings.

Jesus allowed the use of the traditional titles, but recast their meaning through his own way of being king—certainly being in control and seeing to the heart of things, but also showing lowly submission to his Father, and eventually suffering so that the kingdom might be truly established in the lives of men and women.

We are right, therefore, to see the person and work of Jesus as a focal point of Mark’s account. But we should also notice that as the gospel progresses the picture of Jesus changes from the all-powerful conquering centre of divine energy, to the lowly, unresistant, suffering one. What his followers, and the crowds, and his opponents found difficult to see, to which Mark wishes to draw his readers’ attention, is that this also was a release of divine energy, far more significant than the power strategy which had preceded it, necessary though it was. We may have to confess that we, too, have difficulty with that, a point of great importance if discipleship means following our Master.

We have now looked at one of the main strands of Mark’s account namely, who Jesus is. We have seen that this theme changes across the length of the gospel in two ways. ‘Who Jesus is’ moves from an emphasis on a miracle worker to lowly dying servant, though without loss of authority. And ‘who Jesus is’ becomes, in the second half, the basis for concentrating on ‘what Jesus came to do’.

The response to Jesus

Each of these variations of the theme is vital for the other main emphasis to which we now turn. We have already identified it as *how people should respond to Jesus*.

Mark indicates Jesus’ stress on this element by recording his earliest exhortation. Because the kingdom of God is at hand, his hearers should ‘repent and believe the good news’ (1:15). Followed as it is by the series of miracles which Jesus performed, one would expect a welcome response to such an appeal, coming as it does from the person at the centre of the transformations taking place in people’s lives. Here too, however, as with the portrayal of the person of Jesus, so with the response people make, there is a development of theme into something different from the initial portrayal.

To the question, ‘How do people in Mark’s gospel show faith in Jesus?’ the answer, to put it bluntly, is that mostly they don’t! His family misunderstand and try to deflect him from his course. His own townspeople are almost jealous of him and certainly refuse to accept his claims. The religious leaders are at first cool and later directly antagonistic to the point of seeking his death. The crowd follows, enjoying the teaching and being amazed by it, but in the end they do nothing to save him. Even his disciples, and not least Peter, struggle to understand without ever properly doing so, and get things badly wrong. Some of the women are at least faithful as far as the crucifixion, but even their faith fails them at the very end.

Only two groups seem to give anywhere near the expected response—the desperate and the demoniacs. The latter at least show signs of knowing who Jesus is; but they get no further because recognition leads to resistance, not faith, till they are delivered. The desperate alone are seen to be faithful. They have nowhere else to go, and no future to hope for without a cure. In the main they cast themselves on Jesus and find all that they need, and more.

One explanation of this phenomenon of unbelief is *the sinfulness of the human heart*. Mark makes this plain by drawing particular attention to what it means to follow Jesus. It is likely, as some commentators suggest, that the pattern of concentrating half the gospel on miracles and the other half on the passion is deliberate. The pattern is presented to underline the fact that discipleship is not an unending experience of supernatural power revealed in miracles and powerful teaching. Discipleship is also about lowly, costly obedience to the will of God, in facing the sinfulness and evil of human nature in the world. The disciples particularly illustrate how difficult it is for human beings to accept that side of the life of faith. They seem to enjoy all the wonderful works, but they recoil at the talk of the cost. They argue about who will have the seats of honour, both his and theirs. Peter, whose testimony may well lie behind much of what Mark writes, is a particular example both of the good intentions and of the dismal failures of those who were encountered by Jesus.

So one part of the mystery of unbelief is the power of sin in people’s lives. That is not the only, nor even the most important, reason for lack of true discipleship in this gospel, however. There is a second development of the discipleship theme in Mark. Put simply, it is that the people in the story are not able to come to proper discipleship *because they do not yet know the full story*. They are faced by Jesus before his death and resurrection. If true discipleship is, as Jesus keeps on making clear, to carry our cross after him, and to discover God’s care for us as we do, then they are bound to be unable to perceive its total meaning before he dies and rises, though those who are desperate enough seem to make the breakthrough.

Evidence that this is part of the intention of the gospel is seen in the way that, from the very beginning, the shadow of the cross hangs over the story. Mark is not alone in describing the baptism of Jesus by John, with all its implications for our understanding of the death of Jesus for our sins. It signifies his association with our sins, since he had none of his own. But in Mark there is also the early saying about not fasting while the bridegroom is with you, but only when the bridegroom 'is taken away'. Then there is the dramatic change in the middle of the gospel, marked by the repeated prophecy of death, with the resurrection also promised. And half the gospel is given to the passion, including the resurrection. When one adds the way that Jesus speaks of discipleship as taking up one's cross and following him, the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the model for discipleship becomes powerfully clear.

It is at this point that we can perceive part of the reason for seeing Mark's gospel as owing something to the theology of Paul. The reality and power of sin in the world is a pillar of Paul's teaching. So is the centrality of the death of Jesus as its solution. Above all, Paul sees the Christian life as a daily experience of dying and rising with Christ, which is symbolized in baptism. Mark benefitted from Paul as well as from Peter, another reason why this gospel is so basic to the faith of Christians.

From the various roads towards an understanding of the purpose of the Gospel of Mark we have now looked at Mark's own declared intention. We have followed the presentation of the material and the way it develops. Attention has been given especially to major themes of the gospel: the identity and ministry of Jesus and the nature and demands of discipleship. The two have come together in the focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as properly the climax of all that he came to do and as the secret of true discipleship. As we have covered this ground we have noticed the people in the story and the nature of their varied participation.

Mark's readership ... and us

We may now ask about *those for whom the Gospel of Mark was written*. Here we are unavoidably faced with trying to discern from the text itself who they were and why they were the recipients.

Some outside evidence may be inferred from the content. Of the four suggested destinations (Egypt, Antioch, Galilee and Rome) the last would seem still to be the most likely. The people addressed include a majority of Gentiles, since Mark needs to explain Jewish customs. Yet he is not apparently writing to a church torn by Jewish-Gentile power struggles within its life. The spread of the Gospel of Mark, and its use by other gospel writers, suggests that a reliable and strong church stood behind it. The obvious relevance to the 'suffering' element in discipleship hints at a place and time of recent or current persecution. Rome under Nero certainly provides just such a scenario, and is supported by the likelihood that the gospel was written after the death of the apostle Peter, and probably of Paul too. Some time after AD 64 is indicated, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 which is still in the future in the gospel, taking the prophetic element of the gospel seriously.

If Rome is the place then the readership is a varied group. The need for some exposition of suffering in the Christian life would be important. Was there also a tendency in such circumstances to want a particularly powerful form of Christianity in order to counter, at a supernatural level, the persecution being experienced at the natural level? Or was there a view of Jesus which so emphasized his divine nature and power that awareness of his humanity and understanding of human need was deficient? Were so many Christians wondering why, with a Saviour who was Son of God, they should be suffering at all? The answers cannot reach any degree of certainty, but somewhere in that set of suggestions there is probably a fair account of some of the questions being asked.

In response Mark assures them of a strong and lowly Jesus, whose very suffering became an avenue of salvation (a point powerfully made by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:36–39).

The view of authorship taken here is that the writer was John Mark, to whom reference is found in Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37–39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24. He was evidently close to Peter and, after an initial failure, travelled with Paul. His pedigree is therefore strong!

It is clear that Mark did not try to present a chronological biography of Jesus, as a modern historian might. He had at his disposal material from spoken and written sources, and personal testimony from the apostle Peter. All this he sifted and presented in a way which enabled him to communicate those things he felt called to make plain. Such a view of the origin of this gospel in no sense diminishes the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring this part of Holy Scripture. It adds to the sense of purpose behind the gospel, and it acknowledges the vital part of the author. It lifts us healthily clear of views of inspiration which require nothing of the author but the capacity to write words received from heaven. At the other end of the spectrum, it delivers us from views of Mark stringing together isolated segments of tradition with very little purpose other than to include as many as possible. Above all, it concentrates our attention on the text itself, as speaking for itself. There is a mystery about the divine inspiration of human effort, and we do well to acknowledge it and receive Holy Scripture as it is, from the hand of God through the minds of human beings committed to be channels of his will.

How are we to receive and read Mark's gospel? Much in the cultural detail of the first century is strange to us. We need to work hard at understanding it and its significance for those described in the gospel, and for those to whom it first came. We must be conscious, too, of the traditions and thought forms and experiences which shape our perceptions as we read the Bible. These also need to come under the judgment of God the Spirit as we read. But at depth, as the Spirit who inspires the writer inspires the reader, we may perceive fundamental themes which challenge us as directly as they did the earliest readers. Such topics as the nature of the kingdom of God and our part in it; the identity and authority of Jesus our Lord; the centrality of his death and resurrection; their implications for our discipleship; and our own vision of and commitment to mission—all these strand out as part of Mark's contribution to our spirituality and service. His direct and deep engagement with them, and with us, can enrich us immensely.

1. The beginning (Mark 1:1–13)

1. The meaning of the words and phrases (1:1)

a. *The beginning ...*

The Good News version ‘This is’ (‘This is the Good News ...’) misses an obvious link with the Genesis story ‘In the beginning’. Mark is establishing the fact that God is making a new start—new in the sense that it is a great step forward, but not new in leaving everything else behind, as will soon be evident. The first impression created by this gospel, however, is that something has happened which deserves careful attention.

b. ... of the gospel

Now we begin to see why we should watch closely. The word ‘gospel’ has various meanings for us. It suggests a message proclaimed (as in ‘Did he preach the gospel?’), or a book of the Bible (we are studying the Gospel according to Mark). Originally, however, it meant neither. It represented ‘good news’ in the sense of announcing some significant event which made a change in world history, like the birth of the Roman Emperor Augustus. ¹ There is an essential historicity to the Christian message.

When the Old Testament roots of ‘the gospel’ are explored we begin to see why it is so important. In the form of a verb in Hebrew (‘to announce good news’) it means ‘the in-breaking of God’s kingly rule, the advent of his salvation, vengeance, vindication’. ² The focus is on God’s chosen people, but the implications range far wider, especially when, as at the coming of Jesus, they are under foreign rule. God’s in-breaking has world significance. Those who witness it must tell it.

c. ... about Jesus Christ

Mark begins to do just that for his readers. The reason the gospel is an event of world-changing implications is that it is ‘the gospel about Jesus Christ’.

We now have a technical problem. Does ‘the gospel about Jesus Christ’ mean the gospel he preached, or the gospel of which he is the content? A glance at 1:14 clearly indicates the former, but Mark’s gospel as a whole requires the latter. For once we can accept both meanings. The gospel is the good news Jesus preached; and he is at the heart of the good news. The messenger is also the message. This is unlike that other messenger we shall read about in a moment, John the Baptist (1:2–8), who made a clear distinction between himself and the one of whom he spoke, and who saw himself decreasing as the person at the heart of the good news increased (Jn. 3:30).

We understand this identification of message and messenger better as we look at the names of this person who is the centre of the message.

d. *Jesus*

This was a common name among Jews until the second century ad, after which Jews ceased using it to avoid connection with Jesus Christ, and Christians did not use it commonly, out of respect for their Lord. The name means ‘Yahweh is salvation’, and Matthew draws particular attention to that (Mt. 1:21): ‘*You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.*’

e. *Christ*

Though we use this as a name it is primarily a title, and means ‘the anointed one’, or the Messiah. This was the one for whom the Jewish nation had waited for many years, longing for him particularly in days of oppression by others, as was their case now under the Romans. They had much to learn about what God intended by sending his anointed one, but for the moment Mark signals the link between the Saviour and the Messiah in the one who is the heart of the good news.

f. *Son of God*

There is some difficulty over the earliest texts here, some including ‘Son of God’ and others excluding it. One simply has to sum up the evidence on each side and make up one’s own mind. Certainly it is usually assumed that such high Christology is more likely to have been added later rather than included earlier and dropped out. On the other hand, in the processes of copying it is not difficult to imagine this phrase being unwittingly lost. There is strong attestation in its favour in the manuscripts which include it. Most of all if, as seems likely, Mark is here providing the basis for his whole gospel, then ‘Son of God’ would occur most naturally. Just as the title ‘Christ’ will run through the story Mark tells (8:29; 14:61; 15:32), so also ‘Son of God’ is a major theme (1:11; 3:11; 8:38; 9:7; 7:12; 6:13; 32; 14:36, 61; 15:39). On balance it seems better to include it as intrinsic to Mark’s intentions. He wishes us to know that the filial consciousness of Jesus in relation to God is well based in fact. He is, uniquely, Son of God. We need to know that from the outset. Most who met him during his lifetime did not recognize Jesus for who he was, but Mark wishes his readers to be clear about what the church now perceived and proclaimed about him. This contrast is in many ways the clue to the meaning of Mark’s gospel.

g. *Implications of Mark’s opening*

Before Mark’s story develops we do well to reflect on what is implied by his first sentence.

(i) The good news is history

'Gospel' as a world-changing event points to the essential historicity of the Christian good news. Those who believe it, live by it, share it and proclaim it can count on the fact that it happened. Of course the events require interpretation, as the rest of Mark's gospel will make clear. But there is a basic 'givenness' in history which is fundamental to everything else. It happened long before we existed. We don't have to create it, imagine it, embellish it or subtract from it. Like the mountains or the landscape, the Jesus events are part of our historical terrain. We can look back and know that it is there. You may ignore or abuse historical evidence: you cannot erase it.

(ii) The good news is earthy

There is an earthiness at the heart of the message also. It is about God being committed to human affairs, being found alongside us. As Dr Lamin Sanneh put it, the earliest missionaries from the West, who went to Africa and Asia and translated Christian Scriptures into the native languages were asserting that 'God speaks to you in your mother tongue.'

3

It is in the midst of the events of human history that God has made himself real, and continues to do so.

(iii) The good news is basic

Mark does not dwell on the detail of biography or events as his story unfolds. He writes nothing of Jesus' ancestry, unlike the other gospel writers. His interest in John the Baptist (1:2-8) will similarly be strictly limited to the part he played in the unfolding of the drama. It seems that Mark did not believe that Jesus could be 'proved' to be of divine origin—it had to be perceived by faith. So he does not build up steadily to awesome claims about Jesus. He simply states them baldly, clumsily, on a 'take it or leave it' basis. This sheds some light on, and is in turn illuminated by, the difficult verses in 4:10-12. Whatever else they mean, in their use of Isaiah 6:9-10, they certainly make clear that the real nature and meaning of God's presence in Jesus is not obvious—to anyone. It is perceived by God's grace through the gift of faith. The secret seems to be that only as you are willing to respond to Jesus do you perceive by faith the truth about him. Mark's gospel will make this process clear to us too—both positively and negatively.

(iv) The good news is challenge

This means that Mark is not writing just to inform but to challenge to faith. There is an urgency about his story. 'Immediately' is one of his favourite joining words. The gospel is not meant to entertain. It is much too serious for that. Life and death hang on it. In Mark, Jesus' opening words are crucial: '*The time has come ... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*' (1:15). Mark does not only testify to this urgent challenge to believe: he exemplifies it. We do well to hear him as we read his account of the good news 'about Jesus Christ, the Son of God'.

2. An ancient prophecy (1:2-3)

a. It is written ... (1:2)

This expression regularly prepares us for a quotation. Mark is emphasizing that however new and awesome the gospel events are, they have been carefully prepared for by God, and that the Old Testament is the reliable witness to that patient preparation. He does not take away the sense of newness in the gospel: neither does he ignore the antecedent plan of God. They are all of a piece.

b. ... in Isaiah the prophet (1:2)

The quotations which follow are actually from Malachi 3:1 combined with Exodus 23:20, and from Isaiah 40:3. Some think Mark was using a tradition which wrongly attached these quotations to Isaiah. Or they think he may be employing a form of grouped quotation used by followers of John the Baptist. It is more probable that this was a collection of Old Testament quotations brought together because of their common theme, and attached for purposes of recognition to the best-known author. Whichever is the case, Mark is not too tied to the literal text of the Old Testament Scripture as we know it. From Malachi 3:1, the 'way before me' becomes *your way*, and 'for our God' in Isaiah 40:3 becomes *for him*. Even the received Scriptures, it seems, were being seen in a new light because of the coming of Jesus. The way in which he fulfilled the Scriptures causes the New Testament writers to take statements about God and apply them to Jesus, as may have been happening here.

4

Most important of all, Mark wishes us to know that John the Baptist, whom he is introducing through these verses, is part of God's preparation for the emergence of Jesus as the anointed one. After centuries of waiting, that hoped for day is drawing near.

The need for patience

Reading the passage today we rush on to the main story, since we know that a moving moment for John the Baptist and for Jesus is about to be described. In our hurry, however, we may miss the significance of the long wait for the coming of the Messiah, and so ignore a vital spiritual quality—patience. The Bible in general does not make that mistake. The Psalmist often underlines the need to be patient (Pss. 37:7; 40:1; 43:5). Peter says that the prophets gave their messages but were unable to enter into the fulfilment of them because, 'they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven' (1 Pet. 1:12). All the blessings of the gospel have come to Peter's readers. Spare a thought for the prophets who obediently spoke out but never saw the fulfilment of what they prophesied!

Patience in Christians is part of our response to the sovereignty of God. Only he knows the time, place and

circumstance for things to happen in our lives. Often because we know some of the context we imagine we know it all. How often the moment must have seemed right to the prophet! But God knew better. The best answer to some of our prayers is ‘wait’, and sometimes ‘no’, not because God does not love us, but because the time and circumstance are not right just now. In a ‘go-getting’ instant culture we do well to cultivate the Christian quality of patience, over against the constant pressure for success, results and fulfilment. ⁵

3. Enter John the Baptist (1:4–5)

John the Baptist’s ministry is now described, with minimal attention to biographical detail. Manuscripts vary as to the number and order of words at the beginning of verse 4, but the most likely translation would seem to be ‘John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert’, not least because it fits Mark’s style of abrupt introduction of characters and events, highlighting the excitement and the unexpected nature of all that is taking place. God has planned it and is bringing it all to pass: men and women are taken by surprise.

a. In the desert (1:4)

As Stuart Blanch has pointed out, ⁶ the area referred to had a significant geographical location. It was a boundary between East and West, which the Romans would watch with particular care. It also had historical importance. Lot chose the Plain of Jordan when given the opportunity (Gn. 13). Jacob crossed the Jordan on his way to meet Esau (Gn. 33). Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land (Jos. 3). The ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha had focused on the Jordan. In preaching and baptizing here, John was calling up many sacred memories. The desert had spiritual meaning, too. The people had wandered there for forty years, sustained by God’s goodness. There was some idea that the Messiah would appear in the desert. Where better to preach and baptize than in the place where current political tensions, past sacred memories and cherished future hopes met?

b. Preaching ... (1:4)

The word might be translated ‘heralding’. In the Greek city-state the herald (a) preceded the king drawing attention to his coming, (b) called the citizens to the assembly which determined the city’s life and, (c) told athletes at the games what the rules for participation were. To describe preachers as heralds is therefore an imaginative thing to do.

c. ... a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4)

The origin of John’s use of baptism is complex. To be true to him we must seek a Jewish provenance. Jews had practised ritual washings since their time in the wilderness with Moses. Much of the provision of the law had used such washing to preserve sanitation and health. They were also familiar with the idea that washing made pure. The prophets had told them to wash themselves clean from their sins (Is. 1:16–18). Proselytes (those joining the Jewish faith from outside the race) were baptized, too. The surprise in John’s ministry is that he calls on the Jews themselves to be baptized, so underlining the fact that their very religion may be the major hindrance to their readiness for the Messiah for whose coming they looked.

This is why he preached a baptism ‘of repentance’. The word ‘repentance’ is best understood in terms of the Old Testament word meaning ‘to return’ or ‘to turn back’. The prophets had regularly called the people to do this, and they meant not just a change of mental attitude, but a total commitment to serving God, relying on his strength, doing his will and living as his people. Whatever fell short of that required repentance.

d. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him (1:5)

All of them? It must have seemed like that as the crowds came out. Why did they respond to John when their ancestors had so often ignored the prophets before him? They had now waited a long time for their Messiah. Four hundred years had elapsed since Malachi, the last recognized prophet, had spoken. The yoke of Rome chafed painfully and humiliatingly. And John evidently spoke with some vigour (even venom) and directness, if we put the witness of all four gospel writers together. ⁷ When he spoke of the coming judgment of God, they were inclined to believe him! So, confessing, they were baptized in large numbers.

e. Lessons for us from John

Our story so far draws attention to lessons for us today.

(i) The context matters

Christian truth and experience are not found independently of the history, social life and politics of the day. Neither the Jewish prophets of old nor the witness of John the Baptist will allow us to believe that. Precisely the opposite is the case. It is only as religious belief and practice truly engage with the affairs of everyday life that they can be seen to be authentically from God who is the God of all the worlds. John’s role, location, manner and message interlocked Jewish history, contemporary life, future hope and God’s presence in them all. True faith and mission always do.

(ii) Soul and body both matter

There is no room in Christianity for a ‘spiritualizing’ process which influences ‘the soul’ but not ‘the body’; devotional life but not behaviour at work; church life but not home life. John the Baptist’s call swept such distinctions away in one blast of divinely inspired preaching. Repentance relates to every part of life, as does forgiveness.

(iii) Readiness for new ways

There are ebbs and flows in history, as far as the impact of faith is concerned. Whether or not it should be so is a different question, but certainly history reveals it to be so. There are times when cultures, societies or nations seem to turn away from God, and the situation deteriorates steadily or dramatically. Then, so often at a very low point, revival begins, faith is renewed, and life is lived more according to God's will. In those moments it is for the people of God to be ready to respond and play their part. Sadly, too often the years of survival have witnessed the hardening of customs, attitudes and expectations till faith itself depends on them. When God does a new thing in the world, and most needs his people to testify to it and interpret it, too often he finds them resisting, resenting and even opposing it for being not precisely what they had hoped for, or still worse, being too disturbing of their long established ways. Sadly, even many of those who declared, in response to John the Baptist's preaching, that they were ready for the Messiah, proved unwilling to accept the anointed one when he came.

(iv) The vital importance of obedience

The test of true discipleship is on the one side openness to God's will revealed by his Spirit through Jesus, and on the other a life which expresses obedience to that will. The crowds were responsive to John, not least in view of impending doom: they were not ready to follow Jesus along the path of self-giving love, expressed in death and resurrection. The challenge is equally pointed, and the decision equally crucial, today.

4. The aim of John (1:6–8)

John's dress conjures up images of the prophets of the Old Testament, and Elijah (2 Ki. 1:8) in particular (6). His description of his own role is, however, specific rather than general (7). The slave tied the sandals for a master. To be willing to do that for another person is either to denigrate oneself beyond what is humanly reasonable or to elevate the other person beyond all normal categories of work. John's aim is the latter. The reason follows in verse 8: '*I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit*'. We must not assume that this is an easy verse to understand. It helps to hold firmly in mind the fact that the prime contrast is between two persons—John the Baptist and Jesus—rather than between two kinds of baptism. This is borne out by the fact that there is no evidence that Jesus baptized anyone. In any case, much of the contrast between the baptisms depends upon the difference between the persons. What John says Jesus will do is meant to heighten his hearers' awareness of the fact that Jesus is not simply another in the series of prophets of religion: he is the fulfilment of their dreams and visions. God is ushering in the end time through this anointed one who now comes.

Yet John does distinguish between the two baptisms, his own 'with water' and Jesus' 'with the Holy Spirit'. What then did he mean by the latter? Matthew and Luke add 'and with fire',⁸ which has led to scholarly speculation about John's original words. The first suggestion is that he said simply 'he will baptize you with fire', alluding to the judgment the Messiah would bring. The second is that John spoke of Jesus baptizing 'with wind and fire', since the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic words for 'spirit' can also mean 'wind'. In this case John was uniting two elemental forces, which were later identified as agents of God's power when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2–4). If either of these reconstructions is correct, we then have to ask why in the gospels Jesus is described as baptizing 'with the Holy Spirit'. Some scholars answer that the evangelists included these words in order to harmonize John's statement with the later Christian understanding of baptism. Thus, if John had said 'with fire' they added 'and with the Holy Spirit', while if John had said 'with wind and fire', they substituted 'Spirit' for 'wind'. In both cases Jesus would be said to baptize 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire'.

But there is a third possibility, namely that John did actually say 'he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire', and that either Mark did not have 'with fire' in the tradition or source he was using, or that he deliberately omitted the words, leaving only the reference to the Holy Spirit, in order to make it clear that Jesus' coming was primarily about grace, not judgment.

If we take seriously our task of understanding the Scriptures, we cannot simply ignore questions of the kind raised above, nor dismiss them as typical of an attitude of unbelief. Differences between gospel accounts must be faced, and reasons sought. Blanket rejection of alternative suggestions may well prevent us from receiving new light on the meaning of the Bible. In any case we are often dealing with varying shades of likelihood or unlikelihood, and we do well to cross such territory with modesty and restraint about our opinions. It also serves to take the heat out of much debate on these matters, and enables us to reflect more soberly and clearly than might otherwise be the case.

Equally, however, I attach great importance to the principle of the General Editor of this series, John Stott, of seeking to interpret Scripture 'naturally' (as opposed to 'literally', 'figuratively' or other ways). If we approach this text in its context naturally we may note that the omission of 'and with fire' from Mark is less surprising, since he does not have in his account the passages from John's preaching which attack his hearers ('You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?' Mt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7). Nor does he include the sections about God's judgment by axe and fire, ('The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire', Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9). In Matthew and Luke it is immediately after these statements that John the Baptist promises that 'After me will come one who is more powerful than I ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16). Mark clearly omits this whole strand or did not know of it. Either way the reference to fire becomes less important.

If this is the case, then the 'wind and fire' solution is less rather than more likely. But could John have said 'the Holy Spirit'? There are perfectly good Old Testament reasons why he might have done. Ezekiel 36:25–28 provides a strong

foundation for each of the points in John the Baptist's sermon as recorded by Mark. The context is God's determination to redeem his people from their bondage, 'It is not for your sake ... that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone' (Ezk. 36:22). Israel clearly has much of which to repent, and the significance is beyond the boundaries of their own nation. What God is about to do will make clear his Sovereign Lordship, and will keep his covenant promises, 'I will show the holiness of my great name.... Then the nations will know that I am the Lord.... For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land' (Ezk. 36:23–24). But how will God make his people worthy of such restoration? 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols' (25). Their renewal will have to involve a change of heart and mind (26), so closely related to John the Baptist's call for repentance. Most of all (Ezk. 36:27–28), 'I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.' A prophet reflecting on those verses could well have said what the gospel writers record as the words of John the Baptist about the Holy Spirit. The same is true of Joel 2:28, which was so effectively used by Peter on the Day of Pentecost to account for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the early Christians (Acts 2:16–21).

There seems to be no intrinsic reason to doubt that the words recorded by Mark, suggesting that John the Baptist promised the coming of the Holy Spirit via Jesus, are authentic and accurate, as well as fully in harmony with the descent of that Spirit 'like a dove' (Mk. 1:10), rather than flames of fire or gusts of winds, as at Pentecost.

The fulfilment of John the Baptist's promise, baptism in the Holy Spirit via Jesus, is best understood historically in terms of Pentecost (Acts 2), and theologically in relation to Paul's affirmation in Romans 8:5–11, where those who 'belong to Christ ... have the Spirit of Christ'.

Historically, the experience of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is one in a series of God's bringing in the kingdom through Jesus Christ. The foundation of the kingdom was laid in the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. As to the spread of the kingdom, when his disciples asked him about its future (Acts 1:6) Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem for the power that the Holy Spirit would give, and then they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the earth (Acts 1:8). Pentecost was the historic moment when the Holy Spirit came upon the new Christian community. Luke makes clear, in Acts 2:5, that those who received the Spirit in power on that Day of Pentecost were Jews. In Acts 10 he tells of another historic moment, when the Spirit came upon the Gentile believers gathered together by the Roman centurion Cornelius.

It would be wrong, however, to take these historical and historic occasions as patterns for individual believers ever after, and particularly to use them as a basis for a two-stage experience—first faith in Christ and then later the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is here that the theological point has to be placed alongside the historical description.

Paul, in Romans 8, is seeking to encourage his readers in their submission to, and experience of the Holy Spirit. He suggests that they are not entering fully enough into the freedom which the Spirit gives (Rom. 8:2); they are not living 'in accordance with the Spirit' (Rom. 8:5–8). He plainly feels they could be more controlled by the Spirit, but he never doubts that they have the Spirit. Indeed the basis of his encouragement to them to be more fully committed to the Spirit's ways is the fact that they are already indwelt by the Holy Spirit, since all who belong to Christ have the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). They can know God as Father only because the Spirit testifies to their spirits that it is so (Rom. 8:15–16). Paul puts the case in a different way in 1 Corinthians 12:3 when he asserts that no-one can say 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Spirit.

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was therefore the assurance for all time that those whose faith is in Christ receive the Holy Spirit with power. But in the rest of Acts, and in many other places in the New Testament, the question put to the believers concerns how fully they are living in harmony with the Spirit's presence within them. All who know Christ are already baptized in the Spirit. Our calling is to know moment by moment the fullness of the Spirit.

Mark's specific aim is to relate John the Baptist and Jesus to the kingdom of God. The contrast between John and Jesus is strikingly portrayed. John has played his part in announcing the kingdom: Jesus was the heart of that kingdom. John, as Jesus would later say, was the greatest of the prophets, yet the least in the kingdom introduced by Jesus was 'greater than he' (Mt. 11:11). In other words, John had a particularly honoured place. He announced the moment for which many other prophets had dreamed and longed. But it was also a limited place. Once his work was done he would pass from the scene as Jesus took over. John himself knew that (Jn. 3:27–30). His message was limited, too, as was his baptism. None of this is to detract from John's ministry. Quite the opposite, all these passages show how faithfully John played his limited part in God's larger plans.

Finding our limited place in God's overall purposes

John's place in God's larger plans is a lesson with broader implications for us all. We live in an age where to begin, continue and complete things is a dominating passion. Being 'in control of affairs' is taken as a sign of achievement. The Christian knows better than that. The gospel is meant to make us truly 'broad-minded', viewing the whole of life against the canvas of God's eternal plans for us and for his world. Worship week by week reminds us of that perspective, as ought our daily devotions and experiences of Christian fellowship. In that wider sweep of God's purposes we learn to play our limited—yet vital—part. History is his. The universe is his. The mission to the world is his. We are most fulfilled not when we seek fulfilment but when we seek to find our proper place in his never-ending purposes for this world. We are both less and more important than we think. In that on-going process, we belong to one another.

What would be the purpose of the prophetic longing had John the Baptist not been raised up to bring it to its point? And what would have been the meaning of John's words but for the prophets' faithful and painful work over the years? How would Jesus himself have begun without the milestone of baptism at John's hands? The intense individualism of our culture often cloaks the corporate implications of New Testament teaching. The failure of the English language adequately to

distinguish between second person singular and second person plural is also a great hindrance. Not least it masks the fact that most of the great commands and promises of the New Testament are stated in the plural. We need some equivalent of the southern United States expression 'y'all'! In the language of the lovely NIV translation of Romans 12:5, 'In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others'.

5. The baptism of Jesus (1:9–11)

There is a strong link with the Old Testament in the story of John baptizing Jesus. Even the wording produced by the Authorized Version, 'And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee', recreates the mood of many Old Testament stories. So do significant elements in the story, like the opening of the heavens, the Spirit and the heavenly voice. It is permeated by the sense of a drama, composed and directed by an unseen hand, which is played out in a much broader context than that of John the Baptist and his hearers. The preparations have been centuries long; the implications can only be guessed at.

By contrast with the atmosphere of sensitivity to the divine presence, there is the simple allusion to Jesus' home town, Nazareth of Galilee. The contrast could hardly be greater, reflected by the words of Nathanael in John 1:46, 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' It is not that it was a particularly wicked place: it was simply unheard of, never mentioned in the Old Testament nor in those other Jewish sources where you might expect to read of the Messiah's home. We have to try to imagine the shock of this on first-century hearers of the gospel.

The second shock is that the story of the baptism of Jesus by John is included at all. That the one who came to be understood as sinless should submit to a rite directly related to repentance and cleansing is a sure sign of the authenticity of the event. We could well understand Matthew and Luke including in their account all those remembered or communicated elements which went as far as possible to explain the totally unexpected. Matthew, for example, records John as protesting at Jesus' request to be baptized by him (Mt. 3:14–15) but is persuaded to go on in order to 'do all that God requires' (GNB).

What the gospel writers cannot do is to omit it. We may only guess what it all meant to Jesus, but there is great sense in the suggestion that he dedicates himself to obey God's will through an event which symbolizes what the whole ministry will involve—making it possible for sinners to repent in order to find forgiveness and new life from God. In baptism he shares the circumstances in which people become aware of their needs, precisely in order to meet those needs. He was to do that again and again in his ministry, and supremely in his death and resurrection. 'To fulfil all righteousness' (Mt. 3:15) could hardly express it more clearly, and Paul's use of the same word 'righteousness' in the Letter to the Romans, (see especially Rom. 3:21 ff.) works the whole process out in detail.

But what actually happened when John baptized Jesus? It is not easy to reconcile the accounts given in the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

All three synoptic evangelists say that 'heaven was opened', indeed 'torn open' (Mark). This was a common Jewish expression used to introduce a divine revelation. Isaiah 64:1 and Ezekiel 1:1 provide good Old Testament examples. But what was the revelation which the evangelists describe, and to whom was it made?

Primarily the revelation was made to Jesus himself. Matthew and Mark clearly say that '*he saw ... the Spirit descending on him like a dove*'. Mark and Luke also say that the heavenly voice addressed him, saying 'You are my Son ...'.

But was the revelation made to others too? According to the Fourth Gospel, God's purpose through the ministry of John was that Jesus might be 'revealed to Israel', and it was through seeing the Spirit descend on Jesus that John himself learned his identity (Jn. 1:32–34). The synoptists also appear to be saying both that the vision was seen by others (this is the natural interpretation of Lk. 3:22) and that the voice was heard by others, even though only Matthew records it as declaring in the third person 'This is my Son'.

First and foremost, then, the revelation was made to Jesus that he was the Son of God, the Messiah, anointed with and bestowing the Spirit. In addition, however, as the baptism itself was a public event, so surely the accompanying phenomena (the vision and the voice) are meant to be understood as public signs. On the threshold of his ministry the private disclosure to Jesus of his identity and the public testimony to him took place simultaneously.

It is typical of our journalistic, televised age that we demand answers to these questions about the exact nature of the vision and the voice. In Mark's narrative, however, the emphasis lies elsewhere. We are fascinated by 'what?' and 'how?' questions, whereas the Bible is constantly answering the question 'why?' (The struggles over Genesis 1–3 may provide a parallel.) 'What?' and 'how?' questions are important. But if they are given priority status, they obscure what a story is about. This is not to deny the objectivity of the event (the Spirit came visibly and the voice was audible); but Mark's focus is on the significance of what happened.

The baptism of Jesus is about meaning. The rending of the heavens has apocalyptic significance, bringing out this meaning. It is about divine action to introduce the end times. The descent of the Spirit, unusually likened to a dove (John the Baptist must surely have expected at least wind and fire!) calls up memories of the Spirit brooding over creation in the Genesis story—not mildly brooding, but present with enormous creative force. The voice from heaven, also apocalyptic in character, despite lengthy scholarly discussion, still seems best understood as bringing together insights from Isaiah 42:1 ('Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him'), and Psalm 2:7 ('You are my Son; today I have become your Father'). That they are not direct quotations is clear if one simply puts beside those two the text as we have it, '*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*' (1:11). There is no sense of God 'adopting' Jesus as son at the baptism. There does seem to be much in the combination of the lowly suffering servant of whom Isaiah wrote, and the royal prince of the Psalms. This gathers the Old Testament testimony together, focusing it on the high point of the baptism. It also provides the basis for Mark's account, which will concentrate on the way in which

the divine authority of Jesus is finally expressed along the path of lowliness and suffering. And we may guess, though no more than guess, that, combined with John's words and recognition, all this was for Jesus a powerful affirmation of his act of self-dedication, and confirmation of his divine vocation. The next phase of Mark's story shows how necessary such affirmation and confirmation were.

Principles

(i) God constantly takes us by surprise

We cannot ignore the inherent unlikelihood of God's plan of salvation for the world beginning from Nazareth. We may equally have doubted the choice of so remote a prophet as John the Baptist. Were this an isolated case it could be so treated. In the Bible; however, there does seem to be a principle operating whereby God chooses the unlikely person or people to fulfil his purposes. Striking examples are Moses, the leader with the speech defect; Gideon, the youngest son of a poor farmer, chosen to be an army general; Jeremiah, a fiery reflective man too young for the task; and Amos, a farmer from the south chosen to prophesy in the court of the king in the north. The pattern follows through with John the Baptist, then the disciples, and is spelt out by Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 1:26 he tells them, 'Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.' Then, lest the strong should assume that this was a matter of chance, he writes, 'But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him' (1 Cor. 1:27–29). We must not jump to the immediate conclusion that the strong, noble and clever are not usable by God. How else would Paul have been included? But the clue is in verse 29. It is not the status which matters, but the attitude. The poor, weak and lowly are less likely (not necessarily unlikely) to boast before God than are the strong, noble and clever.

One remarkable thread running through Christian history is the way in which the church in times of revival has striven among the poor, the weak and the lowly. Recession of the revival has often coincided with control being taken over by the strong, the noble and the clever. They are not automatically boastful before God, but they have very much more resource for trusting in themselves. All the greatest human gifts have the greatest dangers of abuse built in. All the alleged disadvantages have compensations greater than are recognized. This is not to mount an attack on pedigree, human character, or learning. Nor is it to support the *status quo* with millions of poor people in the world. There are other Christian values which require us to struggle for human growth, ability and learning to flourish, and for their fruits to be shared everywhere. But the greatest characteristic to be sought is humility before God, and to embody and communicate that God has again and again chosen unlikely individuals and groups who have been written off by the world. Let those who have ears to hear, hear!

(ii) We are both inadequate and capable of being used by God

A second principle here at work is at the heart of the baptism of Jesus by John. It is the way God takes what is there and uses it, despite its inadequacies. In this case the Jewish hopes for a Messiah were clearly far different from what God intended. The powerful soldier-king who could throw off the Roman yoke was a fair inference from the model of King David. How relevant that must have seemed to the Jewish people under Roman rule! We might even think that some of John the Baptist's view was also expressive of this picture. Images of axes hacking at roots of trees, and fire running across the floor burning up the chaff, would hardly be satisfied with the Spirit coming as a dove. No wonder John became impatient when Jesus left him languishing in prison (Lk. 7:18–23; Mt. 11:2–6). The Messiah he had predicted could easily have 'sprung a jail'! But it was not to be so, just as Jesus himself would not take an escape route from death on the cross (Mk. 8:31–33; 9:31–32; 10:33–34).

Yet, inadequate though Jewish popular expectations had become, and partial though John the Baptist's views were, God took that as the context for the ministry of Jesus, because the Jews were his chosen people, and because John grasped enough to be the messenger of repentance and forgiveness.

As Christians we need to be clear about such limitations, with regard to ourselves, our churches, and our culture. About ourselves, because at times we may feel useless to God, not knowledgeable or gifted or perceptive enough, and we will always be right in that judgment. The real danger comes when we forget that! But we are equally wrong to assume that because of our limitations God will not use us. Whoever we are, and however partial our knowledge and ability, God can use us.

Where churches are concerned, this lesson of God's willingness to use us applies in two separate areas. There is the context of Christians who constantly grumble about their local church or denomination, and long for something more informed, more pure, more sound, more biblical. All such longings are probably justified! But if the next step for them is to leave then that development is probably not justified. God has never had a perfect church with which to work, yet he goes on keeping his promises, as a covenant God, and doing this work through inadequate human representatives. We need to be sure that when we leave a church it is for God's glory, rather than for our own comfort and convenience.

This same principle applies to the church in another arena, also, that of her influence in the affairs of everyday life. Christians often seem to be overawed by matters social, economic and political. We disguise our inadequacy by speaking of the 'inappropriateness' of church involvement in these matters, or we speak of individual commitment being acceptable, but not the church 'as church', as though that distinction was in any sense biblical, which it isn't. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a Christian behaving as an individual but not as part of the church, unless you can imagine a hand operating but not as part of the body to which it belongs. The stumbling-block seems to be that we feel we are defiled as a church by the participating, or that we do not know enough to do so.

Yet the worlds of social life, politics and economics, ecology and health, education and industry, need the Christian perspective, not just by Christians being engaged in them but by statements of Christian principles, values, insights and examples. The church does not need to have its own political party, or institutions, to achieve that. It needs, however, to be confronting the issues raised, at every level of its life, from individual study and prayer, through fellowship groups and meetings, to councils and synods and conferences, with appropriate comment and action at every level. The church of Jesus Christ has the right and the duty to comment, not least because her Lord is the Word of creation, the one through whom, in whom and for whom the universe was made (Jn. 1:1–14; Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:1–3). To fail to be involved and to make comment in this area of life is not to exercise an option, it is to fail in our witness. God will use us, despite our inadequacy and nervousness if, like John the Baptist, we are obedient.

6. The temptations in the desert (1:12–13)

By contrast with Matthew and Luke, Mark's account of the wilderness temptations of Jesus is blunt in its brevity. It is also characteristically raw—such as the assertion (in the Greek) that Jesus was 'driven out' into the wilderness, as opposed to the 'was led' of Matthew and Luke. There is a sense here not so much of the unwillingness of Jesus to go, but of the urgency that he should do so. This word harmonizes well with Mark's frequent use of 'immediately', and also with the use by Jesus of the word 'must', especially when prophesying his death, and subsequent resurrection (Mk. 8:31). It has to do with the 'beloved Son' obeying the Father's will, under the true guidance of the Spirit. The natural trinitarianism of these verses, assumed rather than spelt out, is in itself convincing.

Despite his brevity, however, Mark has one puzzling piece of information not recorded by the other gospel writers. 1:13 simply says (Jesus) *was with the wild animals*. We are probably meant to understand this as meaning 'as opposed to human beings'. It is the loneliness and isolation which is here emphasized. Yet there is an element of harmony, too. The prophets had foretold that in God's coming kingdom there would be a remarkable unity among living creatures. 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them... The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest' (Is. 11:6, 8). Mark does not go into that detail, nor is he saying that this prophecy is now fulfilled. He may, however, be hinting that such possibilities are drawing nearer with the advance of the kingdom (1:15), and that Jesus' closeness to the animals is a sign of it.

He may not have had humans around him, but as well as animals he also had angels (1:13). It is easy for some to dismiss these as over-spiritualizing human experience, or as elements of superstitious imagery. We do well to recall that there is still much about human inner experience, and about what goes on invisibly around us, that we do not understand. If one ties in with that the experience of Christians over the centuries of being 'protected', 'guided', 'provided for', 'sustained', it seems well at very least to keep an open mind about angels. We may dispense with wings and feathers and much of the artistic creation across the centuries. Much of this depiction depended on visionary passages like Isaiah 6:2. Mark does not here describe the angels, nor the exact nature of their ministry. But if we accept the idea of the transcendent as fundamental to Christianity, then angelic ministry, whatever it means precisely, is a natural and acceptable explanation of those moments in our lives when God's hand seems particularly and unexpectedly on us.

For the rest of that section, the forty days period is full of symbolism. Moses (Ex. 34:28), Elijah (1 Ki. 19:8) or the forty years of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness all come to mind. Rather than seek to choose one, we are probably better advised to see the significance in terms of a recollection of places and experiences of spiritual warfare in Israel's history. These reminiscences, following the baptism of Jesus, speak powerfully of Mark's central theme of the costliness of commitment to God's way of salvation.

a. Following Jesus will not be an easy journey

Mark makes no attempt to explain the link between the baptism and the temptations. If the paragraph above is correct about his intentions, then the whole of the story Mark tells will serve to elucidate that link. To follow Jesus is both free and costly. We are accepted by God's grace, and experience it in our discipleship, but we live it out in a world where God's grace is neither applauded nor welcomed, for men and women are so often made uneasy by such a free offer of salvation, preferring to work things out for themselves. There is also a spiritual battle between good and evil into which the disciple of Jesus is drawn. In that context we survive by obedience to God's will and by drawing on the spiritual sustenance provided in worship and fellowship, Bible reading and prayer, preaching and sacrament.

Our evangelism fails our hearers if we give the impression that becoming a Christian is mainly a way of solving our problems and making life tolerable—even enjoyable—for ourselves. Certainly it is about receiving. Salvation by grace through faith makes that abundantly plain. But it is receiving salvation which brings us into the people of God, the body of Christ, the community of the Holy Spirit, whose calling is to serve God through Christ by the Holy Spirit in the world. That is anything but an easy route; it is the way of daily dying and rising with Christ. Our evangelism needs to make that clear, or what we call our 'follow-up' work will always be failing. The teaching of Jesus, and the preaching of the early disciples, never offered 'cheap grace'. Nor ought we.

b. Faithful discipleship is more about doing God's will than about feeling good

There is some puzzle caused by Mark's omission of the details of the temptation of Jesus. By contrast, see Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13. It has been suggested that Mark knew that his hearers, or readers, had these details already. Yet this seems unconvincing, since he tells them other things they must have heard in the regular preaching and teaching of the church, not least about the cross. An alternative would be that Mark himself did not have these details, either in the traditions or the sources he had received. This is equally unconvincing, both because of the fascination of the temptation

stories and because of their relevance to the disciples' own spiritual experience. It is more likely that Mark's purpose was not to go into intimate personal details in writing his gospel. We have seen that he showed little interest in the biographical details of John and, more surprisingly, of Jesus. His emphasis is not upon being concerned with one's internal state or circumstances, but with getting on as an obedient disciple whatever the consequences.

After decades of the neglect of inner spiritual experience in much of Western Christianity, we have now witnessed a swing of the pendulum in both sacramental and charismatic circles. There is much to welcome in both. There is also a danger of becoming so taken up with one's own internal spiritual state—individually and corporately—that we are almost obsessive about it. Before long 'how we feel' becomes the dominant consideration, determining our judgments on our spiritual state and that of others; whether or not some new idea is from God; even who should or should not be in leadership. Mark seems to be pointing to much more objective criteria, like costly commitment to doing God's will, whether it produces comfort or not, happiness or not, fulfilment or not. It is a 'driven-ness' to the urgent task of obeying God according to the pattern of Jesus, in which there is no time for the luxury of endlessly examining our spiritual state, individually or corporately.

c. The animals and the angels broaden our vision of the kingdom

The animals and the angels provide a brief glimpse of the extent of the kingdom shortly to be announced. However 'earthed' Mark's picture of Jesus is, there is from time to time the hint of the 'cosmic' Christ, so much more openly testified to by John (Jn. 1:1–18), or in another way by Luke in the breadth of the people he records Jesus as having met, taught and healed (Romans, women, children, outcasts). Here in the wilderness, with the heavenly voice of affirmation ringing in his consciousness, as he struggles against temptation and its root in the soil of evil in the spiritual realm, he also has the animals around him and the angels to minister to him. That is probably, too, why Mark so unambiguously portrays Jesus as Lord over nature in the miracle stories he tells.

What Matthew and Luke make clear in their record of Jesus rejecting the temptation to pursue his goal by demonstrations of miraculous power, or by spectacular physical escapes, or by ruling the earth through worshipping Satan (Mt. 4:1–11; Lk. 4:1–13), Mark hints at by including animals and angels in the context of the temptations. The baptism is over; the temptations are resisted, heavenly and earthly beings are gathered into unity around him. The time is right for the declaration of the kingdom (1:14–15), and for hints of the cosmic proportions of the ministry of Jesus. John the Baptist had already warned his hearers that the way they were behaving in daily life was important for their readiness to receive the coming Messiah. We saw the social and political implications of that (pp. 32–33). We have noted the realities of the hidden spiritual world also (pp. 38–41). This bit of the story unites the proper use of the world's resources (as Matthew and Luke tell the temptation story), and the significance of the animals.

If the Spirit descending as a dove was reminiscent of the brooding over creation at the beginning, and if Mark's use of the word 'beginning' in Mark 1:1 also calls up memories of how it was at the beginning, then we must not miss the significance of the total picture, including the animals, for our Christian concern for ecology. The Lordship of Christ is over all creation. His disciples must not use that world as their possession, to be wasted at will. The wilderness, as a place of serious reliance upon what nature (not humans) provided, now witnesses with the animals to the intended ultimate harmony of all creation. We must not affirm that, then waste it.

d. The secret of Mark's gospel

In verses 1–13 Mark has revealed who Jesus is and what he came to do. We, the readers, now know what to look for. Yet in the story that unfolds he will be showing us how difficult people found it to accept what we already know. As Professor Morna Hooker puts it, '... we need to remember that here Mark is letting us into secrets which remain hidden throughout most of the drama, from the great majority of the characters in the story'.⁹ In one sense, that is the story's inner meaning.