# **What is Mark’s understanding of the person and work of Jesus and how is this ‘good news’ for today?**

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Mark’s Gospel is believed to have been written, early. Probably in the late 60s or early 70s (Boxall, 2007, p. 104) or possibly as early as the mid to late 50s (Bayer, 2011). It was probably written in Rome. This is reported by the Church Fathers and 1 Pet 5:13 may be taken to support it (Swift, 1970). Galilee or Syria/Palestine have also been suggested (Boxall, 2007), though mistakes about Palestinian geography make this seem less likely. It seems clear that it was intended for a Gentile audience. This was also frequently mentioned by Church Fathers (Bayer, 2011) and is implied by translations of Aramaic provided explanation of Jewish customs; translation of Latin to Greek; and Semitic speech forms suggesting Palestinian traditions (The St Padarn Institute, 2015). If written in Rome, the intended audience would be very largely local Gentile Christians. The author, clearly not an historian or theologian (Telford, 2003), is generally believed to be the John Mark, a relative of Barnabus (Col 4:10), who was a writer for the Apostle Peter accompanied him, and Peter is seen as the source of most of the material. Again, evidence for this comes from Church Fathers, in particular Eusebius, and the treatment of Peter in the text is taken as evidence (Bayer, 2011). Perhaps given this source, and despite the audience, the text does expect of the reader to be able to recognise and interpret the many Old Testament quotations and allusions in it (Telford, 2003). In particular the understanding of the person and work of Jesus is based heavily on Old Testament promises.

The text is a narrative, the author acts as a narrator at times and takes the reader through the period of Christ’s ministry leading to the climax of his death and resurrection. This is supported by the “road” or “way” motif, starting with preparation by John the Baptist (1:1-8), travels in Galilee (1:14-8:27), the journey from Caesarea Phillipi through Galilee to Jerusalem and to suffering, death and ressurection. Throughout, Jesus is the central character, but an understanding of his identity and purpose is only conveyed implicitly, by the way that the story unfolds (Hooker, 1991).

Throughout, Mark portrays Jesus as a full but complex and unpredictable character and probably his is the most “human” of the Gospel presentations (Telford, 2003): needing his sleep (4:38) and food (11:12); marvelling at disbelief (6:6); showing compassion (8:12), indignation (10:14), anger (3:5), harshness (8:33), impatience (9:13) and vindictiveness (11:13-14) and finally showing distress and sorrow in the Gethsemane (11:33-34). Jesus is fully human.

Particularly through the “Galilee” part of the story (1:14-8:27) the narrative tries to demonstrate authority and power in the person of Jesus through recounting deeds. Jesus demonstrates power over nature, particularly in calming the storm (4:35-41) and walking on water (6:48); over sickness in healing many (specific examples at 1:29-31, 5:25-29, 7:31-36, 8:22-25); over demons (3:22, 5:1-13); over death (5:21-24, 35-43). In 5:30 the narrator tells us that Jesus felt power had gone from him when the woman touched his garment. All of these cases include some demonstration of faith, at least in coming for help. He refuses a sign to the Pharisees who show no change of heart (8:11-12). He shows power and authority to teach (1:21-22 and frequently after 8:22); he shows power and authority to forgive sin (2:1-12). He shows authority to challenge laws and traditions (challenging the Sabbath - 2:23-8; and eating with unrepentant sinners - 2:15). These demonstrations of power and authority suggest or evidence that he is indeed the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises of one sent by God, of the Son of God. The emphasis on deeds would be expected to appeal to a Roman audience (Swift, 1970) and would suggest at least the servant aspect of the expected “suffering servant” (Is 52:13-53-12). His ministry is “authenticated by mighty works” (Swift, 1970). As the story continues we see the disciples’ understanding of his person growing, and we also see minor characters, including those seeking healing, developing some faith.

At no point does Mark report Jesus preaching himself or making any direct Messianic claims until he is before the Council. In answer to the direct question “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, he directly answers “I am”. At the later stages of his ministry, in the parable of the tenants (12:1-12) and the question about David’s son (12:35-37) he alludes to his status (and probably directly provokes the question). Along with his “I am” he claims his Kingship.

At critical points we have direct evidence of the divinity of Jesus. In 1:11 we have the voice proclaiming him as “my beloved Son”. The narrator tells us that Jesus saw the heavens being torn open: it is not clear whether onlookers also saw this. As the group starts out for Jerusalem, Jesus asks “who do people say I am?” (8:27). This would seem to come as a result of the “hidden Messiah” and enigmatic quality of his presentation, leading to speculation and confusion and perhaps it can be seen as the intention to provoke this question in hearers. Peter has reached the understanding: “You are the Christ”. Peter declares him to be the anointed one from God. Shortly afterwards, selected disciples witness the transfiguration(9:2-7) and hear the voice. The words of the centurion at the cross (15:30) may be taken as at least an incomplete understanding and recognition of divinity and as being recorded to indicate the truth of Jesus’ identity (Bayer, 2011). Finally, at the moment of death, the curtain of the temple is torn in two. From an understanding of Jewish tradition, it can be interpreted as Christ’s death opening a direct path to God for all.

Jesus’ work is presented as having three major parts: the coming of the Kingdom; teaching of discipleship, with its costs as the means to enter the Kingdom now and in the future; and his death.

In the first teaching reported (1:14) Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is at hand. He associates his coming with this anticipated hinge point in history where God would again intervene. He teaches about it, largely through parables (4) and is reported as speaking a number of times of entering it.

Discipleship is a major theme running through the text (Hooker, 1991). In the first part, the disciples are called (1:16-20; 2:14); some are chosen (3:13-19); and then sent (6:7-13). In the second (journey) part, the full meaning and cost are taught, in the narrative, directly to the disciples in particular. Discipleship is presented as a fellowship with Jesus, rather than following a code of conduct, and that requires trusting him, confessing him, taking note of his conduct, following his teaching and being shaped by the relationship with him. Moreover, it calls on the disciple to imitate him in self-denial, in humble service (9:35; 10:43-44) and ultimately in suffering (8:34; 10:38). A disciple is to expect rejection as Jesus received. Discipleship is a hard path to follow: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.” (8:35). It is a radical challenge to abandon an old way of life to do the will of God (Hooker, 1991) and the readers are invited to make a choice (Bayer, 2011).

Three times, Jesus is recorded making predictions of his death (8: 31; 9: 30-31; 10:32-34). The disciples find this hard to accept: Peter begins “to rebuke him”. It is a radical departure from the expectations for the Messiah. They have not understood the *suffering* servant. At a simple level Jesus died due to Judas treachery. At a deeper level he died in accordance with God’s will and his obedience to it, and to achieve lasting salvation as prophesied in the Old Testament (Bayer, 2011). Jesus himself speaks of being a “ransom for many” (10:45) and at the institution of the Lord ’s Supper he makes the wine a symbol of his “blood of the covenant which is poured out for many”, but it cannot be said that these are worked out into a full doctrine of atonement (Swift, 1970). 16:9-20 is an addition – it style is different and early church fathers did not know of it. Most of its content is found elsewhere and it does not affect doctrine (Bayer, 2011). In terms of the story telling, without it the ending may be seen as leaving a question – a challenge for readers – predictions seem to have been fulfilled but do you accept the implicit claims about Jesus and will you take up your cross.

The good news of the saving intervention of God is presented through the person and the work of Jesus. The coming of the Christ is itself the good news and it is proclaimed by him. Accepting the discipleship which is the route to acceptance into the Kingdom is tough, but we are given many examples of people with whom we can identify who initially repeatedly fail to understand it. These include the disciples, the women at the empty tomb and other followers and particularly those outside Judea who may be thought to represent a wider Gentile catchment.

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Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.