

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- The Gospel is an 'action story', things happen quickly. Mark's use of 'immediately' occurs so often in the Gospel that the word is often omitted from translations.
- The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us – well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. Discipleship is a big concern in this gospel. (Jude Siciliano OP)
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 15:1-39 (short version) – things to notice

- Begins after Jesus has been arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and been brought to trial before the Sanhedrin (supreme Jewish legislative and judicial court in Jerusalem, consisting of 71 rabbis).
- General background: Mark (like the other evangelists) present the Jewish authorities as the prime movers behind the execution of Jesus, and Pilate as merely acceding to their pressure. Probably reflects the early Christian tendency to play down the role of the Romans and play up the role of Jewish responsibility in the death of Jesus.
- Begins with: the next morning. After formulating its plan, the Sanhedrin sends Jesus to Pilate.
- Jesus before Pilate: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Note that Pilate will later present Jesus to the crowd (with some irony) as 'the King of the Jews'. The title, 'King of the Jews' would have had revolutionary overtones for the Romans.
- Jesus replies: "You say so" but makes no further reply to any questions either from Pilate or to many accusations from the Sanhedrin. Pilate is amazed, presumably because an accused person would normally be fighting to avoid death. But Jesus goes quietly ('like a lamb to the slaughter' – image of the silent, suffering servant from Isaiah).
- Festival-time custom: there is actually no evidence of any such custom outside the Gospel sources. There were occasional amnesties granted from time to time, but no established custom.
- Pilate questions the crowd about who is to be released, Barabbas or the 'king of the Jews'. Note that his question presumes that Jesus has been declared guilty by Pilate (though Mark does not mention this). So the crowd's choice is between two already-condemned prisoners.

- Barabbas, we are told, is a revolutionary and a murderer who has been part of an uprising – the kind of person that the Romans would fear most.
- Incited by the chief Priest the crowd demands the release of Barabbas
- Pilate questions the crowd again: what shall I do with ‘the King of the Jews’?
- The crowd makes its feelings clear: the silent, suffering King is rejected while the murdering revolutionary is chosen. They demand Jesus’ crucifixion.
- A third time, Pilate questions the crowd: ‘What harm has he done’ (What evil did he commit). Again they insist on Jesus’ death.
- Pilate gives in to the pressure of the crowd. Notice, that at no point does he actually pronounce Jesus guilty or condemn him to death – he simply ‘hands him over’ (delivers Jesus to be crucified after having had him flogged).
- Jesus is entirely passive as the soldiers mock him by dressing him up as a king and fashioning a crown of thorns. Mark has the soldier ‘ironically proclaim the truth: ‘Hail, King of the Jews’. They prostrate themselves, fittingly’ as to a king, but also strike him and spit on him. ‘These actions indicate that, while they proclaim the truth, they are rejecting what they are proclaiming. To make this clear, they strip him of the purple cloak, a symbol of royalty’. (FM)
- On the way to crucifixion Simon of Cyrene takes up his cross and follows Jesus. Simon is obviously well known to Mark’s community – his son’s names are in the text.
- The place of crucifixion: Golgotha (Greek) or Calvary (Latin word for ‘skull’).
- Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh, a narcotic to ease pain, but Jesus refuses it. Nothing compromises his total, unconditional response to the Father.
- Jesus crucified & his garments are shared between the soldiers (common practice).
- Jesus is taunted by passers-by, chief priests & scribes and those crucified with him. (“So you would destroy the Temple...come down, save yourself...”). Jesus is again named, ‘King of the Jews’. Note: there is no ‘repentant thief’ in Mark’s Gospel (only in Luke’s Gospel).
- Darkness descends from noon to 3pm – a sandstorm? An eclipse?
- Jesus cries out “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Opening words of Psalm 22, a prayer of a righteous suffering person that ends with an act of trust in God.
- His words are misinterpreted as referring to Elijah, not God.
- Someone get vinegar for him to drink (perhaps a reference to Ps 69:22, ‘They gave me vinegar to drink’).
- Jesus dies – ‘breathes his last’.
- Temple veil rips – Note: only *after* Jesus dies is the Holy of Holies (the dwelling-place of God) in the Temple, once hidden by a curtain, revealed. The real Temple (dwelling-place, Jesus) is now revealed. The separation between God (inside) and humanity (outside) is removed – Jesus is the true meeting place between God and humanity.
- Roman (pagan) soldier proclaims truth about Jesus as ‘God’s Son’. Now, at the cross, is Jesus’ identity revealed – the answer to the question: who is Jesus, which Mark has posed throughout his Gospel.
- Notice that it is a pagan Centurion who proclaims Jesus’ true identity – not one of the disciples or followers of Jesus. Notice the Centurion’s position. He is standing in front of Jesus – ie, facing him. ‘The extraordinary thing about this scene is that as Jesus asks where is God, the centurion answers that God is right here in this desolate, dying human being.’
- ‘One who looks on the crucified Jesus with the eye of faith ‘sees’ not only the human being but the divine one who is incarnate in this human being.’ (MO’B) That is the light shining in the darkness of death.

The Lenten Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for Passion Sunday?

- The First Reading is from Isaiah, part of the ‘suffering servant’ songs and prepares us to listen to the Passion. It is about the servant’s resolve to remain steadfast in the midst of hostile acts against him. The servant is a disciple who listens to the Lord and then speaks

what he has heard. What he says is met with violent attack, but he does not retaliate with violence. His trust is in the Lord.

- There is a link between the Gospels of Sunday 3, 4 & 5 leading us to Passion Sunday, Holy Week, Easter, and onward to Pentecost.
 - 3rd Sunday Jesus is the new temple – the living presence of God (John's Gospel).
 - 4th Sunday: Jesus is light of the world (John's Gospel).
 - 5th Sunday: Jesus is salvation (life) for all – when I am lifted up.... (John's Gospel).
 - Passion Sunday: Jesus is lifted up on the Cross – NOW is the beginning of the 'hour' which we have been prepared for by listening to John's Gospel as the glorification of Jesus and the 'hour' of salvation for the world. Here, on the cross is the true identity of Jesus revealed as: God's Son, as living presence of God (true Temple), as meeting-place between God and humanity, as source of light and life for all.
- Passion Sunday 'sets the scene' for the Paschal Triduum – Holy Thursday (Meditation on the Lord's Supper), Good Friday (Meditation on the Passion), East Vigil & Easter Sunday (Meditation & celebration of Lord's Resurrection).

Reflection for Passion Sunday

Some years ago, I visited the Pro Hart Gallery in Broken Hill. Tucked up in the upper reaches of the gallery, was a painting quite different to the others.

On a sunset coloured wash, it depicted Christ weighed down with carrying his cross. Behind him straggled a ragtag bunch of humanity – the elderly, a child with only one leg on crutches, a man with a machine gun and many, many others. This painting stopped me in my tracks! It almost looked like a pen and ink sketch but for me the impact was enormous. Sure, it depicted Christ carrying the cross but the amazing element for me was that it presented the polyglot of people caught up in the Easter story and brought home to me the enduring relevance of the Passion here and now, for all of us.

If we were to create a similar picture, which figures would it contain? Perhaps it would include the people of Syria, the Rohingya refugees, the refugees flooding into Europe, the elderly without support systems, people living in abusive relationships, people whose sexuality does not fit 'the norm', kids who are sick and hungry, workers for the common good with very limited resources, the down-and-out beggars on city streets, people who do not receive a fair wage for their work, people who cannot find work, people in 'Detention Centres', people under repressive regimes – be it in their country, their workplace or their home. The list seems endless.

What about the people in Jesus' time? At least some of them were expecting a triumphal Messiah who would overthrow oppression with arms and flaring battles. Not what they got. Instead they had a rabbi who emptied himself of everything.

What about the ordinary people in western civilisation in our own time? Are we misguided in our expectations too? Are we selling out to the lie that more and more is better as we live under the yoke of corporate greed, which causes jobs to disappear and dreams to disintegrate?

Are we any different to the people of Jesus' time who waved palms and yelled out, "Hosanna"? Are we any different to the crowd that screamed, 'Crucify him!'

Instead of a superhero, we have a man who looks at the ragtag of humanity and still says to us 'This is my body.'

The Easter story is worth remembering, re-telling, re-imagining, because it is the story of all of us in one way or another.

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