

Mark themes

Prologue

Hello to you all!

This is the first of a series of talks that will eventually cover the whole of the New Testament (if they go to plan!). I have prepared a short introductory video for the series, which provides information about the videos and supporting resources and the (very approximate) schedule, and offers a few comments specifically for church and academic viewers. This is available on my YouTube channel; you may like to watch it before diving into this one. We are going to begin the series with the Gospel of Mark.

It is often suggested that there are three main theological traditions or streams in the New Testament. One is found in the so-called Synoptic Gospels – the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, which have many common features and seem to stand in some kind of literary relationship – and in the sequel to Luke's Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. The second is represented by the Pauline letters: its main themes are laid down in seven of the letters, and the other six are a set of variations on some of these. And the third tradition is expressed in the Gospel and letters of John, which use many of the same words and ideas. Distinctive contributions are then made by the other six New Testament books, though among them only Jude and 2 Peter seem to be closely related. So the idea of the series to take the three major traditions in order first, and then look finally at the remaining texts.

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts were almost certainly not the first New Testament documents to be written, but as they tell the story of Jesus and the earliest Christians they are a natural place for us to start. But although Matthew is placed first in our Bibles, we are starting this series with Mark instead, because it is widely reckoned to be the first of the Gospels to be written, and it is very likely that the authors of Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source. So many of the major themes of Mark are common to the whole Synoptic tradition, although of course the author presents them in his own distinctive way.

Key themes

So now let us work in turn through those key themes.

First theme: The age of fulfilment

The first topic to consider is what might be called the 'temporal framework' of the Gospel, or more simply its location in God's time. Mark situates the events that he recounts at a particular point in the story of God and God's people, which provides the readers with a basic context for understanding their significance.

So to express this framework concisely: Mark's Gospel tells us that in the mission of Jesus, and climactically in his death and resurrection, the eschatological age has begun, and the promises of the Old Testament scriptures and the hopes of Israel are being fulfilled; and that these events happen according to the purpose of God.

Notice the key concepts. The *eschatological age* is the final block of time, the last days or last age or age to come, when God's plan for the world is brought to its completion. This is related to the idea of *promise and fulfilment*: the period covered by the Old Testament is the age of promise, when God declared and prepared for what was to come; but that has now been succeeded by the age of fulfilment, in which everything anticipated in the scriptures and by God's people Israel will now be realised. This has happened according to a

foreordained *divine purpose* or plan and through the *work of Jesus*, which culminates in his *dying and rising* from death. The more specific themes that we are going to examine all make sense only within this basic framework, and they can be seen as developments of it.

Second theme: The kingdom of God

Secondly comes the theme of the kingdom of God. In Mark's Gospel, God's purpose disclosed in Old Testament Scripture is achieved in the coming of his kingdom; that is, his eschatological saving rule. It is important to realise that God's kingdom is not his sovereignty, his control over everything that happens; that never changes. The kingdom of God is his *saving* rule, the rule by which he delivers his creatures from evil and sin and death and enables them to fulfil their God-given destiny, to become what he always intended them to be. This rule is associated in Jewish expectation with the age to come, and the Gospel tells us that it has been launched in the mission of Jesus.

So John the Baptist is presented as the forerunner whose ministry was foretold by the prophets and whose task is to prepare the way for the Lord's coming, in the person of one who is greater than John. John's baptismal practice, his preaching of repentance and his announcement of a stronger one who will baptise with the Spirit and fire all point ahead to and presuppose the imminent arrival of God's kingdom.

Then when Jesus appears in the Gospel story, the first words ascribed to him are 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near.' And the account of his ministry that follows shows him inaugurating that kingdom by three related means: his prophetic proclamation, his authoritative teaching and his mighty works. Before we touch on those, though, let us notice too that Jesus can both successfully summon disciples with a compelling word of command and can defeat all his opponents in debate. Let us note that his words and works attract large crowds and generate wonder and awe. And let us observe that they also provoke conflict with demonic powers and their human agents. All these elements of the story support the Gospel's claim that in Jesus' ministry God is bringing in his kingdom.

The coming of God's kingdom involves the liberation of people from the authority of evil forces to live instead under the authority of God. The different aspects of this freedom are disclosed in the means that Jesus uses to inaugurate the kingdom. Firstly, his preaching offers forgiveness of sins, and he welcomes sinners to share fellowship with him and to follow him. Secondly, his teaching explains the nature of the kingdom and the demands of discipleship laid on those who wish to enter it. Thirdly, his healings, exorcisms and raisings from the dead deliver people from the power of Satan in what is presented as a new and greater exodus from slavery, while his nature miracles attest to God's provision for their needs.

Before we move on, two more specific points should also be made about the kingdom of God in Mark. Firstly, God's saving rule is in some respects surprising; it challenges natural expectations and values. We will see later that it does not correspond to some central components of Jewish hope regarding the age to come and subverts certain aspects of Jewish practice, and Jesus attracts disapproval by celebrating it with what seem to be the wrong sort of people. And key parts of the call to discipleship, such as taking up the cross and finding greatness in service, challenge not only Jewish understandings of God's kingdom but also contemporary Gentile measures of value.

And secondly, in Mark the kingdom of God will grow through his agency into something superlatively great, but it does so from small beginnings. We will look briefly at the future aspect of the kingdom when we mention Jesus' return; for now we should note only that the kingdom does not arrive all at once and for everyone to see, but gradually and for those with eyes to see. Again, we will come later to why God reveals it in this way.

Third theme: The identity of Jesus

The third key theme of Mark's Gospel concerns the identity of Jesus. We have already seen that he is the person who launches God's kingdom, but the Gospel makes even greater claims for him than this. It does so in a wide variety of ways, but one of them that is quite easy to see is the titles that it ascribes to him. The importance of these is seen in the very first sentence, which refers to 'the gospel of Jesus Christ' or 'Messiah', and some manuscripts add the further title 'son of God'. Also Jesus frequently refers to the 'son of man', apparently as a designation for himself. We will briefly expand on these three titles.

'Christ' is not a name; it is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term 'Messiah' and means 'anointed one', and in early Judaism it is usually (though not always) a royal title. It designates Jesus as the promised king of Israel from the line of David, appointed by God to proclaim, establish and rule over God's kingdom. So Jesus is not just announcing the kingdom's coming or providing anticipatory signs of it; he is himself the agent of God's saving rule, and that rule is demonstrated and defined by his mission. Yet for most of the Gospel story Jesus does not want to be publicly known as the Messiah, and we will see why later.

Jesus is also the 'son of God'. It is important to note that this title does not mean in itself that Jesus is God, because it is applied elsewhere in Scripture to many others, for example to Israel, to kings of Israel and to angelic beings. In Jewish expectation it was also another title for the Messiah, and it has this meaning in Mark's Gospel. But here it also means that Jesus is called by God to his distinctive role and that he is uniquely related to God as his Father. It means that he possesses divine power, authority, knowledge and splendour, which are manifested in various ways during his mission. It means that he is anointed by the Spirit for his work and pours out the Spirit in judgment and salvation. And it means that he is assisted by angels and opposed by the devil and his evil powers.

The meanings of the title 'son of man' and its usage by Jesus are much disputed, but in Mark it seems to have at least three distinct but related aspects. Firstly, it denotes Jesus as a human being who exercises God's sovereign authority on earth; it holds together his full humanity with his divine agency. Secondly, it portrays him as an exalted figure who is coming in glory both to judge and to save; it looks beyond the confines of his earthly ministry to his heavenly glory and future return. But thirdly, it presents him as one who is destined to effect divine redemption not by triumphant conquest, but by death and resurrection. This is a vitally important theme in Mark's Gospel, which affects both how Jesus is revealed and how his disciples are to follow him.

Fourth theme: The death and resurrection of Jesus

We can however deal quite quickly with the actual death and resurrection of Jesus. Their importance in the Gospel is underlined by the amount of space devoted to them – six chapters out of sixteen in modern versions – and by Jesus' threefold prediction of them, but not much is said *explicitly* about their significance.

It is clear enough from the Gospel narrative that it is by his rejection and vindication, his suffering and exaltation, that Jesus fulfils his identity as Messiah and son of God. His death and resurrection are the basis on which God's kingdom is established; they are the events through which God makes possible the deliverance of his people from evil.

But only in two places does Mark give us clear indications of *how* Jesus' death functions in this way. As Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper on the night before, he reveals that his death is a redemptive sacrifice in which he experiences God's wrath and establishes a new covenant. And earlier, in defining service as the measure of greatness among his disciples, he declares that he has come to give his life as a ransom for many; through his death his people are delivered from evil and sin and from their consequences. Nothing at all specific is

said about his resurrection except his statement that after it he will go ahead of his disciples into Galilee, and the confirmation of this by the young man at the empty tomb. And the fact that the resurrection narrative is cut off so sharply at 16:8 (for whatever reason) precludes any further examination of what it means. We must be content with what we have.

Fifth theme: The return of Jesus

When we move to the return of Jesus, we find that the picture is somewhat complicated by the difficulties of interpreting the main passage of Mark's Gospel that deals with it. Mark 13 is an extended discourse by Jesus that appears to relate to both the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and his return at the end of the age, but commentators do not agree on which parts of it relate to which event. (A few even argue that it is not about Jesus' coming at all.) So some caution is required, but most scholars at least would subscribe to some version of the following.

At the start of the Gospel, John the Baptist ascribes to Jesus the work of eschatological judgment and purification: God's cleansing of the world from evil in the last days. (This is what 'baptism in the Spirit and fire' means in this context.) Jesus has begun that work by inaugurating God's kingdom in his ministry, death and resurrection, but for now his consummation of that kingdom, his bringing it to perfection, is still awaited. So Jesus is expected to return imminently, in power and glory, to achieve this; at that time he will complete God's punishment of the wicked and will finally deliver, gather and reward the righteous.

The intervening time will be characterised by false messianic claims, by distresses of various kinds, and by the rejection and persecution of the disciples. These events are the signs and birth pains of the consummated kingdom that is coming. Jesus' return will also be preceded and anticipated by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, however the two events may be precisely related. (We will think some more about the temple later.) All these events will happen within a generation after Jesus' mission.

It is likely that at least initially Jesus' coming was also expected within that timeframe. But by AD 70 some forty years had passed, and when the fall of the temple came and went and was not immediately followed by his return, the author of the Gospel may have wanted somewhat to moderate and calm his readers' eager anticipation of the end. So while they should still be ready for it at any time, there may be a significant delay before it happens. Specifically, the good news of Jesus must first be preached to all the nations, a task that was certainly underway when Mark's Gospel was written but still had some way to go, even within the known world of the time.

Sixth theme: The Holy Spirit

Mark's Gospel does not have much to say about the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist predicts that the stronger one who is coming after him will baptise with the Spirit, which here refers to that end-time role of judgement and purification. Then we see the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism and immediately sending him out into the desert. When the scribes say that he is casting out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, he accuses them of blaspheming the Spirit, which is an unforgiveable sin, implying that the exorcisms are actually effected by the Spirit. And he promises that when his disciples are called to account for their allegiance to him, the Spirit will speak through them.

Seventh theme: Revealing the kingdom

One of the most prominent themes in Mark's Gospel is what many scholars have called 'the messianic secret'. This concerns Jesus' reluctance to allow his identity as Messiah and son of God to be made known. He forbids both unclean spirits and people whom he has healed to say who he is, and even when Peter confesses him as the Christ in chapter 8, he

immediately tells the disciples not to speak to others about him. Only before the Jewish council near the end of the story does he make an open confession of his identity.

Various explanations have been offered for this curious feature of the Gospel. A first clue is perhaps to be found in Jesus' practice of teaching in parables and his refusal to perform conclusive signs of his identity for those who demand them. Mark is making the point that the presence of the kingdom of God is now being revealed through Jesus to those who are willing to receive it. But the parables and the refusal of signs purposefully conceal it from those who are not willing, for those who evaluate what Jesus is doing according to merely human standards and find it wanting, including most obviously the Jewish authorities. Only on Jesus' return will the kingdom be disclosed in power for all to see.

The disciples of Jesus are given privileged access to his revelation of the kingdom through his presence and private teaching, but even their understanding of his identity and work is limited. In particular, they fail to grasp both the necessity of his cross and resurrection and the nature of the discipleship he requires. This deficiency leads them to fail in both discipleship and mission, to the point of sharing at least some of the faults exhibited by his enemies. But Jesus does not reject them, perhaps because their blindness is only temporary.

So it seems likely that Jesus' concealment of his identity and message, and the disciples' failure to comprehend their nature and implications, indicate that these can be properly understood only in light of the cross and resurrection. This is true within the framework of Jesus' ministry: it is only after he has died and risen that his disciples' blindness will be cured; only then will they truly perceive what his messiahship and divine sonship really mean and what demands they make on those who follow him. But it is also true for the readers of the Gospel: any understanding of Jesus that leaves out these events and views him only as a triumphant wonder worker without reference to his suffering fatally distorts his identity and significance and provides an inadequate foundation for authentic Christian discipleship.

Eighth theme: Israel and the Gentiles

Another recurring theme in Mark's Gospel is the relationship of Jesus' mission to the Judaism of his day. Mark makes clear very quickly that the kingdom of God that Jesus is inaugurating cannot be confined within the traditions and norms of Judaism as represented by the Pharisees (or by the Jews of his own time). Jesus' authority is presented as greater than that of even the law and the prophets, and he exercises this to reinterpret or even override key elements of the law, including the Sabbath and the purity rules. We are probably also meant to understand that his death as a redemptive sacrifice puts an end to the sacrificial system of the temple.

Jesus' ministry therefore provokes conflict with his family and local community and the Jewish authorities, who are representative of Israel as a whole (though not of every individual within it; all his first followers are Jews). His antagonists are portrayed very negatively, presumably to underline that they are setting themselves in opposition to God's kingdom and purpose. They are defective both doctrinally and morally; they are blind to Jesus' identity; and they reject him and eventually bring about his death. But although they are opposing God, there is also a sense in which their response to Jesus is foreordained by God, because it leads to a reconstitution of God's people.

This reconstitution takes place in three steps. Firstly, Jesus rejects the teaching, practice and authority of the Jewish leaders; then secondly, their rejection of him brings divine judgment on them, on the Jerusalem temple, and on the nation. Finally, God's establishing of a new covenant by Jesus' death redefines the people of God in terms of relationship to him instead of according to Jewish ethnicity and practice. From now on merely being Jewish is

insufficient for membership; a person must believe in Jesus and conform to God's will as declared by Jesus.

The point is confirmed by the contrast that the Gospel draws between Jesus' proclamation of his message and its acceptance in Galilee, which is an area that includes both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), and the conflict and rejection that he experiences in Jerusalem, which is the centre of Israel's national existence. The life of God's people is no longer to be centred or grounded on the temple in Jerusalem and submission to the authorities who govern it, but on the good news of Jesus and a positive response to him, a response that can be made by Gentiles as well as Jews. Because Israel has rejected Jesus, it has lost its national privilege.

In the narrative of Mark's Gospel the message of the kingdom is preached by Jesus first and primarily to Israel. He is the Jewish Messiah who announces and effects the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel that were made in the Jewish Scriptures, and for the duration of his ministry the blessings of God's kingdom are offered mostly to Jews. But even before his death and resurrection some Gentiles come to share in some of those blessings, or they recognise his identity and put their faith in him, and this minor but significant element of the Gospel reaches its climax in the crucifixion scene, where the Roman centurion declares him to be 'son of God'. It anticipates what will happen later and is already happening when the Gospel is written, as the good news is preached to all the nations.

The New Testament exhibits a spectrum of views on the continuity between Judaism and the new people of God created by and centred on Jesus. These reflections suggest that Mark's Gospel lands nearer to the discontinuous end of that spectrum.

Ninth theme: Discipleship

If experts on Mark's Gospel are asked to identify its most important themes, many will name Christology and discipleship as the top two, or at least among the top few. Christology is about who Jesus is, and discipleship is about what it means to follow him. And the two are closely related: Jesus' identity as defined in the Gospel determines how his followers are expected to live. We will now look briefly at various aspects of Mark's teaching on discipleship.

Firstly, the basic prescribed response to Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom is repentance and faith: this is the first command he issues in the Gospel. Repentance is a turning away from a sinful way of life and a turning towards God to serve him, while faith is perhaps a more complex idea, involving elements of belief, trust and commitment. Its object is initially the gospel message – 'Repent and believe the good news' – but it also includes faith in Jesus himself, and in God. It follows from repentance and is the way in which the kingdom and its blessings may be accessed; it entails receiving these humbly, like a child.

Secondly, discipleship requires a lifestyle that is appropriate to the eschatological age – the final period of time, the last days – and to the kingdom of God that Jesus is establishing. So it involves confessing Jesus as who the Gospel reveals him to be, and following the way that he prescribes by his teaching and example, which requires wholehearted dedication to him.

Then thirdly, as we have seen in relation to the messianic secret, authentic discipleship is supremely defined by Jesus' death and resurrection. That is to say, the life of the kingdom of God can be accessed only by following Jesus in the way of the cross, which is marked by self-denial and suffering, and may lead to death. It requires Jesus' disciples to stand firm in the face of affliction, which puts them under pressure to abandon their allegiance to him.

Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark's does not include much detailed moral teaching. But like them, fourthly, it does define the basic ethic of the kingdom as love for God and love for the neighbour. And also like them, it does make clear that the measure of

greatness among Jesus' disciples is in their service of others, an evaluation that contradicts ordinary human perspectives, and specifically assessments of value current in the Gentile world of the time.

And finally, in Jesus' discourse about his return he warns his disciples that since this could happen at *any* time, they must be ready for it at *all* times. Those who deny him in the meantime or are unprepared for his coming will be denied by him when he comes.

Tenth theme: Mission

Our last theme is the mission of Jesus' disciples. In Mark's Gospel, towards the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he calls twelve disciples, whom he designates as apostles, so that they might be with him and he might send them out. Later in the narrative he duly commissions them to continue his work of preaching, healing and casting out demons, and they go out on a mission. This is evidently temporary, and Mark does not say that it was repeated, although there are a few indications that the disciples continued to exercise the same kinds of ministry.

No one else is said to be enlisted in the work before Jesus' death, however, and the Gospel includes no general commissioning after his resurrection, like Matthew's Great Commission; perhaps it was part of a lost ending to the book. But as we have seen, Jesus does say that the gospel must be preached to all nations before his return, and in the same context he speaks of his disciples' witnessing before Jewish and Gentile rulers with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. There is no indication of whether or not the ministry of healing or exorcism was supposed to continue.

Also discipleship is sometimes designated in Mark's Gospel as 'following Jesus', and although this principally denotes imitation, it may imply a secondary sense of engagement in his mission in at least some way. Elsewhere in the New Testament we find two-tier models of mission, where some believers go out to preach while others support them in various ways. But we do not know enough about the mission practice of Mark's Christian communities to claim that he envisages such a model.

Applications

So we conclude our overview of Mark's Gospel with some brief reflections on its most obvious applications to contemporary Christians and the church.

We can remind ourselves firstly that the coming of God's kingdom in Mark involves the liberation of people from slavery to evil forces to live instead under the authority of God. The freedom that results includes forgiveness of sins, healing from sickness, release from demonic oppression and even raising from death. It enables those who are set free to enjoy fellowship with Jesus and provision for their needs and to follow him in obedience to his teaching.

It is not clear how far Mark expects the ministry of Jesus and his disciples to be precisely replicated in the churches of his own time: whether, for example, he anticipates powerful healings or dead people to be restored to life. But his understanding of the kingdom does entail an expectation that God will continue to set people free in tangible ways from the control of the devil and his agents, to live instead under the rule of God as defined and exercised by Jesus. The gospel message embodied in his text is powerfully transformative, and as Christians proclaim it and live it out we should look for our own and others' lives to be changed both visibly and significantly through Jesus.

Secondly, Mark's Gospel gives us a twofold and complex picture of the person whom believers confess and follow as Lord. On the one hand, Jesus is the agent of God's salvation and judgment, anointed by the Spirit and possessing divine qualities, exalted in resurrection and coming in glory. But on the other hand, for much of his ministry he conceals his kingly identity, and he fulfils his vocation and achieves his vindication only through his suffering and death. Also, although he inaugurates the kingdom of God in the present, it will not be consummated until his future coming.

Unbalanced views of Jesus are found among the contemporary churches, just as they were among the Gospel's first readers. It is by no means unusual in some circles today to find him presented primarily as a wonder worker who establishes God's kingdom among and through his people by the naked exercise of power. But it is in no way to deny the remarkable transformative effects of that kingdom (which we just mentioned) to regard this as a gross distortion of Mark's teaching, in which the saving rule of God is grounded and effected in Jesus' sacrificial self-giving for others.

But the Gospel's Christology should also temper our expectations for how far Jesus will change our lives and those of others in the present. Because the kingdom of God has yet to be consummated, release from the power of evil forces (even for Christians) remains incomplete until Jesus' return. Mark must know that disease, demons and death remain active among his readers, and he certainly anticipates that believers may be persecuted even to the point of martyrdom. We can by all means hope confidently in the presence of God's kingdom among us, but we must also recognise that it is not yet fully here.

So thirdly, and perhaps most obviously and directly, the Gospel of Mark also has major implications for Christian discipleship. The book may not contain a lot of detailed ethical teaching, but its basic principles are demanding enough: repentance and faith, confessing and following Jesus, love for God and the neighbour and service of each other, and constant readiness for Jesus' coming, not to mention at least some kind of involvement in his mission. And perhaps foremost among Mark's prescriptions is the requirement to walk in the way of the cross, with its demands for self-denial, suffering and perhaps death, and for faithfulness in affliction.

Over-triumphal views of Jesus are often accompanied by over-triumphal views of discipleship: the idea that Christian experience should be free from all kinds of distress, and that if it is not, someone must be at fault, perhaps through lack of faith or through sin. But the Gospel's teaching on discipleship fatally undermines such views. It says that all the blessings of God's kingdom can be realised for us only in so far as we are willing to submit our own will to the will of God revealed in Jesus, and to accept whatever suffering befalls us as we live in loyalty to him, standing firm in faith and commitment in the face of hardship and hostility, even to the point of death.

Fourthly and finally, Mark's Gospel bears upon the churches' relationship with Judaism. This is a less urgent issue for us than it was for the book's first readers, and we might be disposed to dismiss it; many Christians in the West will have little or no contact with their local Jewish communities (as distinct from individuals), and for those who do, this is likely to be quite amicable. But some contemporary Christian readings of Old Testament prophecy and understandings of the supposed role of Israel in God's end-time purposes have sharpened for some of us the question of how far the churches properly stand in continuity with Judaism and should embrace distinctively Jewish practices.

As we have seen, the Gospel author tends to emphasise discontinuities between the disciples of Jesus and Judaism, and he certainly sees these as extending to the relationship of church and synagogue. Jesus has re-cast or set aside key elements of Jewish life – Sabbath, food laws, sacrifices – he has rejected the authority of the Jewish leaders; and he

has reconstituted the people of God around himself without ongoing reference to Jewish ethnicity or practice. So while the churches should certainly proclaim the gospel to Jewish people and welcome them gladly and equally as disciples of Jesus, Mark's Gospel does not expect us to re-adopt aspects of Jewish life that have been rendered obsolete by his coming.

And so ends our study of the Gospel of Mark. Please do share your comments below. The next talks in the series is on the Gospel of Matthew.

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