PARALLEL GUIDE 1

Listening to the Gospel

Summary

The first lesson for Year Two is an introduction to the heart of the New Testament, the Gospels. This is done through the shortest of the Four Gospels, the Gospel According to Mark.

Learning Objective

The objective of this lesson is simple: to appreciate the Gospel According to Mark as we believe early Christians experienced it, by hearing a lively reading.

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

Prepare to read or watch a dramatic presentation of the Gospel According to Mark. This will take the entire evening so the group needs to plan for this during the prior seminar. Invite everyone to participate, regardless of what year they may be studying.

Preparing for Your Seminar

1. Come prepared for a dramatic presentation. This may be offered by watching a dramatic performance of the Gospel According to Mark. We recommend two possibilities (there may be others):

Alec McCowan, *St. Mark's Gospel: King James Version.* Videotape. Distributed by the American Bible Society, 1865 Broadway, New York, New York 10023.

David Rhoads, *Dramatic Performance of Mark.* Videotape. Distributed by Select, 2199 E. Main Street, Columbus, Ohio.

N.B.: McCowan, who is a fine professional actor, is much the better; on the other hand, Rhoads uses a modern translation (his own), and some find that more helpful than the KJV. The group could even watch a part of each. Or both!

Or

2. Divide the text between members of the group, perhaps assigning roles. Spend the evening reading the Gospel According to Mark aloud. This chapter suggests that there are four acts and an epilogue, so schedule your breaks accordingly.

Additional Sources

Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel in Its Literary and Cultural Settings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Chapter 1

LISTENING TO THE GOSPEL

"Faith," said Saint Paul, "comes from what is heard" (Rom. 10:17; cf. Gal. 3:2). Undoubtedly that is where most of the first Christian believers began. They listened to those like Paul who proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, and to their letters, which were read aloud in the Christian assembly, perhaps when they gathered to share the Eucharist (Col. 4:16).

The Gospel According to Mark

Then, around 70 CE, a Christian called John Mark seems to have decided that he could gather together enough material about the Lord Jesus—his sayings, his deeds, his life, and his death and resurrection—to write an account. John Mark produced what we now know as the Gospel According to Mark—by no means the oldest of the New Testament writings (that distinction must go to the letters of Paul), but evidently the oldest of the four Gospels.

Mark and his contemporaries would have called what he wrote a "life" (Greek: *bios*; Latin: *vita*), a genre that was, at the time, extremely popular. This was unlike modern "biography," which particularly since the nineteenth century has tended to focus a good deal on the inner life of its subjects, delving into their thoughts and motivations. Greco-Roman "lives" generally centered on what their subjects said and did, leaving the audience to work out motivation for themselves. This, of course, is exactly what Mark does. We hear a great deal from him about what Jesus said and did; we hardly ever hear about what Jesus thought.

The Oral Tradition

Like all who wrote before the invention of printing, Mark naturally assumed that most people who experienced his work would do so by hearing it. The written word was still regarded as largely a preparation and resource for the spoken word. The ability to read aloud from a text, and to do it well, was highly valued. Nor was this an easy skill to acquire. Manuscripts of the period were unpunctuated and did not even have spaces between the words. Certainly it was assumed that reading for a public occasion would require careful preparation.

Episodes

Mark's work shows signs of being written for public reading. For example, its author takes an apparent delight in "bracketing" or "framing" various episodes. Two parts of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter bracket the story of the woman with the issue of blood (5:21-24, 35-43); two parts of the story of the cursing of the fig tree frame the cleansing of the Temple (11:12-14, 20-24); and two parts of the story of Peter's denial bracket Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin (14:53-54, 66-72). Its author makes striking use of irony, particularly at Jesus' trial and crucifixion. There is irony in the paradox with which the priests mock Jesus, "He saved others, he cannot save himself" (15:31). There is irony in the *titulum* nailed to his cross, "The King of the Jews" (15:26), which Pilate also intends as mockery. In both cases we know that what is being said in jest is actually the truth. Such stylistic motifs, and several others in Mark, are widely recognized by literary critics as characteristic of what is called "oral structuring."

1

Where might Mark have expected his book to be read? According to Luke there was a celebration of the Eucharist in Troas at which Paul talked for so long that a young man called Eutychus fell asleep, dropped several stories out of the window where he was sitting, and when he was first taken up, was thought to be dead. Once clear that he was uninjured, the group celebrated the Eucharist together, and Paul *even then* continued talking until dawn (Acts 20:7-11)! About a century later Justin Martyr describes the Christian Eucharist at which "the memoirs of the of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits" (*Apology* 1.67). We should place the first readings of Mark's *Life of Jesus* into this evolving context. It would have taken about seventy minutes to read aloud (by the standards we have been observing, a modest enough claim upon the community's time). Doubtless Mark hoped that, unlike Paul, he would be able to keep even the Eutychuses of the assembly awake. Certainly he intended by his composition to give both pleasure and instruction to his hearers.

Four Acts and an Epilogue

The narrative he presented was in simple outline, but not loose or carelessly constructed. It fell into three quite clearly defined parts (we might almost say, "Acts"), with a brief prologue and a brief epilogue.

The prologue (1:1-8) told of a messenger who announced the Coming One, in accordance with prophecy.

The first part (1:9-8:21) told of Jesus' wonderful words and works in and around Galilee.

The second part (8:22-10:52) told of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem with his disciples, during which he repeatedly spoke to them of his coming death and resurrection, and they repeatedly failed to understand.

The third part told of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-15:47). It begins with his messianic entry and continues with his prophetic act in the Temple and his teaching (12:1-44), his farewell discourse to his disciples on the Mount of Olives (13:1-37). It concludes with the story of his passion: his last supper with his disciples, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and his death (14:1-15:47).

The epilogue (16:1-8) told of a messenger who announced the Crucified and Risen One, whom his disciples were to see just as he had promised.

Mark's first hearers listened to his gospel story: and since that is what they did, that is what we do as well. It will raise for us many questions and difficulties. For the moment let us see what we experience when we hear the Gospel read as it was intended to be read: dramatically, carefully, not in fragments, but as a whole.