

Mark's Gospel

A reflection on Jesus' humanity

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We now know that there exist multiple Gospels. The early church put the four into the New Testament as a matter of theology and politics. We also know that contrary to its placement as the second gospel, Mark was likely the oldest, written about 70 BCE, a good four decades before John, the youngest.

Jesus's identity was a matter of ongoing argument for the early church. His status as the Son of God and a member of the Trinity was only settled at the Council of Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) in 325 CE. In the previous centuries, he was anything from an inspired rabbi to the promised Messiah to a magician.

What seems significant about Mark, as one of the earliest Christian writers (only Paul's letters to the Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians are older), is this: Jesus is portrayed as a human being. There is little of the mythic elements of the other Gospels like the virgin birth or, central to the Christian narrative, the resurrection. There is no triumphant ending: Mark ends with the women fleeing the empty tomb, astonished and trembling.

It is the gospel of paradox but perhaps Jesus at his most relatable: the suffering servant, the spiritual seeker (the narrative starts with his baptism by John), the man of prayer. He often goes to a place of stillness to pray: 'And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed'. (Mark 1:35).

It reminds me of John Woolman's insight that 'the place of prayer is a precious habitation.... I saw this habitation to be safe, to be inwardly quiet, when there was great stirrings and commotions in the world.'

There is no supernatural stuff, just a life heroically lived and whose courage seems to have come from prayer and working out the implications of prayer to love your neighbour.

Among the few supernatural stories in Mark is the one when the sea obeyed Jesus' command to be calm. He and his friends had gone out in their boat and while he slept, the waves rose.

At Peter's pleading, he called out, 'Peace! Be still!' (4:39). When reading this story, I often recall that wonderful verse in Psalm 46:10, 'Be still and know that I am god' and I wonder if Mark really meant to suggest that Jesus was telling Peter to be still.

There is another verse in the Psalms that also highlights the importance of calm and quiet: 'I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.' (Psalm 131:2).

And there is that marvellously vague passage in the first Book of Kings (19:9-12):

'Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.'

Interestingly, the last line does not say whether or not the 'sound of sheer silence' was, in fact, god.

What are we to make of the idea that Mark's Gospel begins with a sort of commitment ceremony in the River Jordan and ends in ignominy in a tomb whose ownership Mark leaves in doubt? David Swain, writing in *The Australian Friend* in 2011 (link: <https://australianfriend.org/articles/issue/1109-september-2011/>), suggested that when George Fox wrote his famous letter from Launceston prison in 1656, containing the phrase, 'walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one', he was using the word cheerfully in an older sense of courage rather than in the modern sense of being pleasant or joyful. In this sense, the Jesus of Mark's narrative also seems to have walked cheerfully over the world.

Note: CE = Common Era, what used to be AD, to remove the Christian overtones. BCE = Before the common era, what used to be BC, also to remove the Christian overtones. These terms are now generally preferred in secular writings.