



Mark on Mark

Notes to accompany the discussion
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A. Learning how to listen

In our highly literate society, we make a clear and significant distinction between communicating in speech and communicating in writing.

Speaking is interactive and personal: both in casual conversations and in more formal speeches we are aware of the speaker and about what he or she is trying to communicate, and why. What sort of person is the speaker, and why is he or she telling me this? Does it influence the way I think about the topic? The context plays a role in my understanding, too. I will interpret what a person says about me in a job interview very differently from the same thing said by that person during a party.

The written language is very different. We don't think of writing as an interaction between me and the author. Reading is almost always private and silent. We focus on the content, and rarely think much about the writer or the setting in which he or she wrote. This is true also on the infrequent occasions when we listen to a written text that is being read aloud. What we listen for is the information or ideas that we think of as 'the message'—not for clues about the author's personality or circumstances in which he or she wrote.

By contrast, in biblical times—and, indeed, for many centuries afterwards—the written word was regarded as a means of reproducing what was spoken. The author recorded (sometimes by dictating to a secretary) what he

wanted to say to a particular audience. Rather than trying to speak to them in person, he sent them a written version of what he wanted to say. The books of Scripture were always intended to be read aloud to an audience, most of whom were illiterate. The author attempted to instil a little of the sense of his physical presence, and so to engage their hearts and minds.

An instructive example is the Apostle Paul's writings. He had a lot of important things to communicate with various churches who were in distant places he could not visit in person. He asked a friend to act as his amanuensis—to write down what he wanted to say to them. Take, for example, the following excerpt: we can imagine Paul walking around, talking aloud, varying his tone of voice, and gesticulating to make his point to the people who, in his mind's eye, were with him in the room.

Some members of the church in Corinth were arguing about whether their faith was in Jesus, or in one of the apostles who had brought the gospel to them. In composing his letter to them, we can almost hear Paul as he cries out in exasperation:

Did Paul die on the cross for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? No—I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius: no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (1 Cor 1:13—15)

Then he corrects himself (verse 16):

Oh, yes, I did also baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't think I baptized anyone else.

As Paul was talking so animatedly, the amanuensis was desperately trying to write everything down. Once it was written out, Paul commissioned someone to take the letter to Corinth and read it to the congregation.

Of course, most of Scripture is not as conversational in style as this example. Nonetheless, every part of it was an inspired attempt to share with a particular audience the insights the writer had received from God's Spirit. We moderns are not used to listening for this when we hear a biblical passage being read. If we develop the habit of "listening in", as if the author were speaking to a crowd including us, we will find more and more that the words written in the Bible become the Living Word.

Listening, specifically listening to Mark's gospel, is the focus of this session. We will try to form a mental picture of the sort of person Mark was, and why he wrote his gospel. What was he trying to impress on his original audience, and what can we learn from him, so many centuries later?

B. What is a gospel?

Most, if not all, of us will have read a biography of some famous person, and we tend to think of the gospels as biographies. This is a bit misleading. In modern biographies, the emphasis is on giving as much carefully-researched information as possible. They typically start with the person's family history, sometimes going back several generations, and take us through the phases of the person's childhood, focussing on the people, events, and ideas that led to the adult character. The biographer does not usually offer an opinion about the person, but seeks to give a detailed, factual and reliable, account of his/her acts and achievements that will be of interest to a wider general public.

The gospels are rather different. Here, the writers' focus is much less on the details of Jesus' life and much more on their meaning. Each writer sought to reveal to Jesus' early followers the true nature of the one they called Lord. Each of the evangelists had his own personality and particular concerns, and the Christians they were writing for lived in very different geographical and cultural settings. As a result, the four gospels are distinctively different. They all deal with the life, death and resurrection and teachings of Jesus, but each has a distinctive emphasis. We will come to Mark's focus shortly; here let us briefly describe those of the other three gospels.

- i. *Matthew*: This carefully structured work was written for a group of churches who were struggling. They were all Jewish converts to Christianity, and were being challenged by traditional Jews to define the new faith. The Christians were also troubled by the fact that the all-powerful Romans wanted to overthrow the new religion. Matthew is a careful teacher. He develops in detail, and with clarity, the nature of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah (or Christ), who fulfilled the religion of the Jews, and through them his plans for the whole world.
- ii. *Luke* had a grand vision of the new religion of Christianity. He particularly wanted to encourage the non-Jewish believers to feel part of a world historical movement. He recorded this important history in two long books: his gospel and Acts. As a physician, Luke was interested in Jesus' unprecedented capacity to free human beings from their ailments, both physical and spiritual. His gospel includes many healing miracles.
- iii. *John* seems to have been addressing the specific situation of his own church community, who were struggling to grasp the dual nature of Jesus and how it could transform them and bring them salvation. We modern readers can sense a fine philosophical mind striving to explain deep spiritual insights into the cosmic conflict of light against darkness. There is also an artistic side to John, who presents Jesus' earthly life in a dramatic form,

interacting with a number of individuals, whose characters are well developed.

These three works, with their different emphases, provide a far deeper insight into life-changing spiritual truths than a mere historical record of the facts of Jesus' life could ever give. We can benefit greatly as they offer a far richer and wide-ranging perspective on Our Lord's nature and mission than we would get from any single one. And so to Mark ...

Mark opens his book with "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". He was the first person to apply the word "gospel" to a written life of Jesus. The word is often translated "good news" or "glad tidings", which is accurate, but understates his point. We get a better idea of what Mark meant if we interpret the word as something like "thrilling (or fantastic or wonderful) news". One modern translation of the Bible I came across recently expresses it as "The beginning of the shout of joy about Jesus ..." This was Mark's motivation for writing his life of Jesus, and his excitement is evident throughout.

C. About the author and his experience of Jesus' life

Who was Mark? As with so many of the Bible writers, we do not know for sure. He may have been the John Mark mentioned a few times in Acts (e.g., 12:12), who was a companion of Paul. Some early writers identified him with the one referred to by Peter (1 Pet 5:13) as "my son, Mark". Some people assumed that the gospel was Mark's attempt to record Peter's memories of life with Jesus.

It cannot be historically proved, but, given the style of the writing, I think that Mark was writing, not Peter's, but his own impressions of this amazing Jesus. I imagine Mark was one of the crowds who accompanied Jesus almost everywhere, as noted occasionally in all the gospels. That Mark regularly hung around Jesus is hinted at by the traditional identification of Mark as the "young man" who narrowly escaped being captured when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:51—52), and ran away naked. If it was indeed Mark, he would very likely have been in his late teens or early twenties—an age at which one develops significant life impressions. The gospel was written about 30 years later, and I think that in it the middle-aged Mark was relating his vivid memories of what went on, and his emotional reactions at the time. He was both enthralled and utterly bemused by this fascinating man, whose daily life Mark observed and, from time to time, participated in.

The tone and scope of his gospel give it a very different feel from the other three. What all four writers have in common is that they paint a picture of Jesus' day-to-day living and interactions with people. But, whilst the other three seek to interpret it in terms of a coherent theology, Mark simply seems to be trying to recapture what it was like to be there with Jesus, so we can sense for ourselves something of the captivating warmth and complex mystery of his presence. To draw an analogy with modern media, his gospel is less like a talking-head lecture about the great man, and much more like a fly-on-the-wall documentary, a "Day in the Life of Jesus".

Mark gives us a fast-moving narrative, in which one scene follows another in breathless fashion, introduced by words such as "immediately" "and then", "soon afterwards". Jesus is almost constantly interacting with others—the disciples, the crowd, religious leaders, even demons! Amid all the activities, although he often mentions that Jesus was teaching, we hear only snippets of that teaching. There are far fewer parables in Mark than in the other gospels. This implies that Mark cannot fully comprehend Jesus' message, so doesn't try to expand upon it. Contrast that with Matthew's assured and measured Sermon on the Mount (Matt chs. 5—7).

It is easy to imagine oneself present in virtually all the scenes Mark describes. He specifies, with the directness and clarity of an observer, what Jesus and the others involved did, and the words they spoke. To take a couple of many examples, listen to his account of Jesus

encouraging the children (Mark 10:13—16), and curing a paralysed man (Mark 2:1—12). Mark includes more miraculous healings than any other gospel: he clearly found them astonishing and highly significant. Of course, not being one of the twelve disciples, Mark would not have been personally present at some of the important scenes of Jesus' life that he describes (e.g., the Transfiguration, Mark 9:1—10). I suspect, however, that, as a frequent companion, he was well acquainted with at least some of the disciples, and no doubt they viewed the enthusiastic young man with some affection. They would have been willing to relate what happened, and he keen to imagine himself there.

Listening Hint 1:

Imagine each passage from Mark as a little drama reconstructed from memory, and ask yourself:

- Who are the characters involved?
- What do they say?
- What action takes place?
- What impression does Mark leave you with?

D. Two aspects of Jesus' life depicted by Mark

There are many interesting aspects of Mark's arresting portrayal of Jesus' life. For the sake of time, we will restrict ourselves to his fascination with Jesus' interactions with the people around him. These people fall into two main groups: the disciples, with whom he talked in private, and the crowds who gather round Jesus whenever he is in a public space, and often when he is inside a house. Mark's crowds almost always include two kinds of people: the ordinary folk and the religious leaders. The former provide a sort of encouraging backdrop to everything Jesus says and does; the responses of the disciples and the religious leaders are very different. Neither of these two groups really understands Jesus. The disciples want to, but they constantly struggle to do so, and Jesus often seems exasperated with them. The religious leaders try in various ways to undermine Jesus' ministry, but without success.

1. Interactions with the disciples

Even though one would expect the disciples to have a profound understanding of the significance of Jesus' life and teaching, Mark finds them a pretty disappointing bunch. Although Jesus often explains things to them in private, they are frustratingly slow learners. On the one hand, they clearly want to be faithful followers—they promptly accepted Jesus' call to be his disciples—and they prioritise spending their lives with him over their everyday

occupations. On the other hand, they constantly misunderstand what he says to them, or they cotton on and then shortly afterwards completely lose track.

Jesus often chides them for being so slow-witted. For example, there are three scenes in which they are in a boat with Jesus (Mark 4:35-41; 6:47—56; 8:14—21), and on each occasion he has to tell them off for being obtuse (“Do you still not understand?”). Worst of all, they totally let him down in his last days: they fall asleep three times while he is agonisingly praying in Gethsemane; they deny him at his trial; they finally desert him altogether.

Why would Mark portray them so negatively? I see them as an embodiment of Mark’s own profound puzzlement. He challenges us to put ourselves in their (and his own) place, and to decide for ourselves what it means to follow Jesus. With the best will in the world, this is far from easy. How will we respond to him when we hear the story? This open-ended offer of discipleship is strongly emphasised at the very end of the gospel in its original version (the verses after 16:8 were added several centuries later). On Resurrection Day, the two Marys who visit Jesus’ tomb find it empty. A “young man dressed in a white robe” tells them Jesus has risen:

Go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

This is, as it were, the final challenge: will the disciples meet the risen Lord, or have they completely given up after his death? And, very much to the point, how will those (including us) who have heard Mark's gospel respond?

Listening Hint 2

Whenever the disciples are mentioned in a reading, think about what they do or say. Why do you think Mark portrays them in this way? What might he be suggesting about what it means to follow Jesus?

2. Interactions with the crowds

As noted earlier, Mark portrays Jesus engaged in constant, busy activities and interactions with people. There are about 40 or so different contexts in which these activities take place. In the first part of the gospel, up to the end of chapter 10, Jesus roams far and wide around the countryside. He is sometimes up a mountain, at other times in the desert; he is standing beside the sea or a river, or in a boat sailing. Sometimes he positions himself in public spaces, at others he goes into a synagogue, the Temple, or a private house. From chapter 11 onwards (roughly the final third of the book), he is in or close by Jerusalem, and everything he does or says is intimately related to his impending death.

Most of these many settings involve crowd scenes. The common folk followed Jesus in droves, and on occasion there were so many present that he could not even have something to eat (Mark 3:20). Like all the gospel-writers,

Mark is impressed by the response of these people to Jesus, in particular their amazement at his miracles. Mark regularly makes observations like the following:

... they were all astounded, and praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mark 2:12)

They were filled with awe and said to one another, "Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him." (Mark 4:41)

[The people's] admiration was unbounded. "He has done all things well", they said. (Mark 7:37)

However, it seems that in every such gathering of people there were also some religious leaders, and their reactions to Jesus are consistently negative, challenging his authority to act and speak as he does, e.g.:

Now some scribes ... thought, "how can this man talk like this? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? (Mark 2:6)

... the scribes and the Pharisees asked the disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16)

The scribes were saying, "He is possessed by the prince of demons ..." (Mark 3:22)

As often as Mark describes Jesus' enthusiastic reception by the ordinary folk, he also relates an intense and growing conflict with the religious leaders. In the last third of his book, set in Jerusalem, this conflict intensifies, and leads inexorably to his trial and crucifixion.

The crucifixion is obviously the climax of the story for Mark, but he doesn't attempt to interpret it. He leaves it to the audience to decide how they will respond, as we noted in his brief account of the resurrection. Significantly, he sees that the meaning of his story is for the whole world, not only Jews. The crowds who so often accompanied Jesus included many from beyond Israel. Two simple but very significant comments at the end of the drama of Jesus' death emphasise this universal implication. First, the veil of the Temple is torn in two (symbolising access has become available to all). Secondly, a Roman soldier (not a Jew) gives his final verdict: "Truly, this man was the Son of God". His words complete the circle by taking us back to the very opening words of the book ("... the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God ...").

Listening Hint 3

We often base our impressions of certain individuals by noting how other people react to them. If the passage being read includes a crowd and/or religious leaders, pay careful attention to what they say, or what they do. What does this suggest about what Mark is trying to communicate about Jesus?