

MARK

Mark, like Matthew, had a second name. He was also called John. John Mark grew up in Jerusalem, but when the Apostle Paul came there for a visit, he decided to go with him to Antioch in Syria. Later he accompanied Paul and his uncle Barnabas on their first preaching mission to the Gentiles. He was their assistant, so he was probably young at the time. Indeed, he may even be the 'young man' whom he describes in his own gospel, without naming him, as having observed the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Mark 14:51, 52). We do not know exactly when he wrote his gospel, but he was certainly living in Jerusalem in the early years of Christianity. He is probably the 'Mark' included in the Apostle Peter's greetings in 1 Peter 5:13, so he may have spent time travelling with Peter and recording his stories of Jesus.

Mark's approach is to summarise in powerful, dynamic phrases the thrilling events of Jesus' ministry. His record is called '**synoptic**', that is, it gives a broad overview of the subject without getting lost in the details. Frequently he uses the words "immediately", "at once" or "forthwith" to describe the effervescent energy with which Jesus strode across the landscape of Galilee, healing, teaching, and calling men and women to follow him.

Many years ago, a famous English actor ran a one-man show in London where he recited off by heart the whole of Mark's gospel every night. Try reading Mark aloud to yourself, as if it was a play and you are acting the parts of the characters. Or read through Mark chapters four and five together. Here Mark describes a typical twenty four hours in the life of Jesus. It runs like this - Jesus spends the afternoon teaching in parables from a fishing boat. At nightfall, exhausted, he commands the fishermen to take him across the sea. He is so tired he sleeps through a storm, and has to be woken up to deal with the crisis on the boat. Next morning he heals a madman on the eastern shore (somehow, Jesus knew Legion was waiting for him over there). His task complete, he returns to the west side of the lake. He is at once swamped by the huge crowd that is waiting for him to appear. He plunges into his work. He heals a woman with a haemorrhage. He walks to Jairus' house and heals the sick daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, a man he could well have counted his enemy. He instructs the parents to make sure she has had something to eat, and yet he has had no time to eat himself. Another day is already well under way, and his only rest has been a few hours snatched on the boat. That, Mark is saying to us, is the Lord we have been called to follow - loving and entirely selfless.

Note how Mark records the many times Jesus explained to his disciples that he was going to be killed in Jerusalem, but that he would rise on the third day. Mark describes perfectly their surprise and bafflement at this idea.

Six of Mark's sixteen chapters are spent looking at the last week of Jesus' ministry, and his death and resurrection. His last chapter has a break part way through, and the original ending may have become lost, but he conveys perfectly the shock and despair that hit the disciples when Jesus died, and how difficult it was to convince them their master was alive from the dead. Like Matthew, he ends with Jesus' commission of the Apostles to go out into the world, preaching the good news to all nations.