

Feast of St. Mark

Today the Church celebrates St. Mark, one of the four evangelists who have given us a written gospel. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four. His gospel is 678 verses, whereas Matthew is 1,071 verses and Luke is 1,151 verses. It is about 60% of Matthew and Luke's Gospels. Only 3 or 4% of Mark is unique.

According to tradition, Mark essentially served as Peter's scribe. He wrote down Peter's preaching while in Rome. Clement, Origen, and Jerome attest that Mark interpreted Peter's preaching. Church historian Eusebius, writing in the 4th century, quotes Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (AD 60-130), who says:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them.

We heard in our first reading that Peter refers to Mark as "my son" who was with him in "Babylon" (Rome) (1 Peter 5:13). In this light, the tradition is that Mark wrote from Rome.

Additionally, many believe that Mark writes for Gentile Christians given that he speaks about a woman divorcing a man, which was not permitted in Judaism. In chapter 7, Mark interprets the meaning of the purity laws for the reader, which Gentile Christians needed.

Mark tells the reader up front the reason why he writes. He writes to proclaim the gospel. The first 13 verses of Mark's gospel are known as the prologue. It sets the scene for the rest of the book. In those verses, the reader learns that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Additionally, many believe that Mark wrote to strengthen the Christian community in Rome who had gone through persecution with another one on the way. He wrote to remind them that discipleship involves suffering.

Under Emperor Nero (64 – 68 AD), the Church in Rome suffered brutal persecution. Rome burned on July 19, 64 AD. Ten of the fourteen districts burned down. Nero blamed the Christians, and then had them tortured, burned, and fed to the wild beasts. As Messiah, Jesus suffered and so will those who follow Him.

Furthermore, in reading Mark, one senses that his gospel moves quickly. In fact, Mark uses the word “immediately” no less than 40 times in his gospel. Jesus serves the Father without delay. This would have resonated with a Roman audience, who were known for their efficiency.

Finally, a winged lion depicts Mark’s gospel. In Venice, one can see a winged lion in St. Mark’s Square (Piazza San Marco). His gospel begins with St. John the Baptist “crying out in the wilderness,” or roaring like a lion upon hearing the Word of God. In the Book of Revelation, the lion is one of the creatures around the throne of the Almighty.

St. Mark’s relics were originally buried in Alexandria, Egypt. However, two merchants stole them and brought them to Venice in 828 AD. Mark is the patron saint of Venice. He is rightly venerated as one of our great heroes. May we have the courage and wisdom to proclaim Jesus as Mark did!

~St. Mark, pray for us!