

## You've got the time: 2 - Mark & Luke

This morning we're on part two of a six week series covering the New Testament. If you're listening to or reading the Bible Society's 'You've got the time' and following the plan that's set out, then by now you're around the early chapters of Mark's Gospel. In the next week we'll be listening to all of Mark and most of Luke.

If we imagine the gospel writers as artists then each one of them paints a different picture of the life of Jesus. It isn't a photographic record (wouldn't our understanding be clearer and more straightforward if it was?) but rather each artist brings a different style, a different interpretation, a different emphasis to his picture. Matthew, Mark and Luke stand fairly close together as they draw. In fact it looks at times as if Matthew and Luke are copying from what's on Mark's easel because much of the outline is the same. John, on the other hand, is standing in a completely different place, producing something rather more abstract all together.

To get a good, easy to understand overview of the gospels, in fact a good overview of the whole Bible then I recommend this book: *The Bible from Scratch* – a lightening tour from Genesis to Revelation.

As the Gospel writers create their pictures they go at different speeds, and include varying amounts of detail depending on who they're drawing for, and of course their own personalities. This morning we're looking at two Gospel writers who have very different styles. Mark creates his image quickly and roughly. His paintbrush flies across the paper and it's full of energy, full of life. No time to stop and consider, constantly on to the next thing. Luke, by contrast draws slowly, carefully, in an orderly way, adding detail as he goes.

The verses from each of these two gospels that I read a few moments ago highlight the differences between the styles. Mark covers a huge amount of ground in only twelve verses. He doesn't concern himself with a birth narrative. He's not interested in all that stuff. There's no real backdrop to his portrait. Instead he launches straight into John the Baptist preparing the way. And before we know it Jesus is being baptised, the Holy Spirit has come upon him and he's heading off into the wilderness to be tempted. It's as if the artist's brush is flying over the paper with such speed that those watching are left breathless. There's such energy in this artist's style.

Have you ever read the whole of Mark's gospel at one sitting? It's a great thing to do. It only takes a couple of hours. But the pace is exhausting. Mark paints Jesus constantly rushing from one place to another, using phrases such as 'at once', 'as soon as', 'immediately', 'Jesus left there'. The story advances so quickly that we can hardly keep up!

Luke, by contrast, with his carefully organised and detailed portrait takes three chapters to get even to Jesus' baptism. The backdrop is important for him. He has told his audience, after all, (with a dedication to his friend Theophilus) that his aim is to produce an orderly

account based on careful investigation. And this isn't his only work. There's a sequel – the Acts of the Apostles, in which we learn that Luke (a doctor by profession) accompanied the Apostle Paul on some of his journeys.

Mark writes in a rough style of Greek where Luke's is polished and educated. Mark's gospel has a rawness about it, an earthiness that makes you feel Mark was really there. His stories are very believable as eye-witness accounts. Tradition has it that the author of the gospel is John Mark, a chap who was known by Peter (and probably by Paul too) so Mark would have had the opportunity to learn all about Jesus from Peter's story-telling, or at the very least from listening to his preaching (at various times in church history Mark's gospel has even been nicknamed the gospel of Peter).

Mark's gospel often portrays the disciples as ignorant, obtuse men who failed to understand what Jesus was trying to teach them. Not at all a flattering image, and certainly not an image that later on the church wanted to portray! Perhaps Mark paints them in such an unfavourable light because he had such good first-hand information from Peter himself.

Jesus, too, is portrayed by Mark as being very real, very human. For example, he gets angry and frustrated on occasions, and particularly when the disciples don't understand what he's explaining to them. He's unable to perform miracles when the appropriate conditions of faith are lacking at Nazareth. And Mark emphasises that Jesus he suffers physically, feeling alone and anguished in the garden before his arrest. All this points to one of the probable reasons that Mark wrote his Gospel: to correct an idea that began circulating in the early years of Christianity that Jesus hadn't really been human after all– he had only seemed to be. Mark causes his readers to face up to the knowledge that that wasn't the case. And to remind them to hold in tension the mystery that Jesus was *fully* human as well as *fully* divine.

Luke's gospel, as we've already said, is a far more polished affair. It's in two parts and between them this doctor's writings in Luke and Acts account for a quarter of the New Testament. Luke has an emphasis on concern for the poor, the vulnerable and the outcast and so he highlights the way Jesus tramples the social norms of his time. There are a number of stories involving the poor, social outcasts and women that are unique to Luke's gospel. They don't appear at all in Matthew, Mark or John. Just as a quick example, the parable of the Good Samaritan shows a much despised ethnic group in a good light.

If we consider the Gospel of Luke as the first half of a larger work, then we can see that one of his aims is to connect the events of Jesus' life and ministry with that of the contemporary church. He shows that there is a connection between the life of Jesus and the growth of the church, and he does that by developing the theme of the work of the Spirit. As a quick example, Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming that the Spirit of the Lord has come upon him, and The Acts of the Apostles begins with the Spirit coming at Pentecost. Luke's gospel forms a sort of early handbook for the Christian life.

But of course there are similarities between these gospels too. Both gospels are written for Gentile audiences and the basic story is the same, which should come as no surprise given that Luke (and indeed Matthew) borrowed heavily from Mark. Most of Mark's gospel is contained in Luke's. They both include his early ministry and calling of disciples. They both highlight Jesus' healings and teaching which leads up to Peter's confession, 'You are the Messiah', and then the watershed of the transfiguration. They both focus on the movement towards Jerusalem and the huge concentration on the last few days of Jesus' life.

Which Gospel are you drawn to? Do you warm more to Mark or to Luke? If you had a choice, which one would you prefer to read? Which portrait of the life of Jesus is more pleasing to your eye?

How you answer those questions will depend very much on your personality. If you're an activist you're more likely to prefer Mark's account. If you're more reflective by nature you might well prefer Luke's. It will also depend on the circumstances of life in which you find yourself at the moment. If you're in the thick of life, living it at a hundred miles an hour then Mark may well strike a chord. If you have time to think through and ponder life then Luke may be the gospel for you. If you identify with the rawness of the disciples Mark will move and motivate you. If you have a burden for the marginalised in society, Luke will hit the spot.

Despite their different emphases and intended audiences, the overarching message of all four gospels is the same: that Jesus, God's son, came to earth and conducted a radical ministry, before being crucified and raised from the dead.

And it doesn't really matter which gospel we prefer or which one is our favourite to read as long as we are living as committed disciples of Jesus.

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Mark 1:1-12 & Luke 1:1-4

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### **For Discussion**

1. Do you have a favourite gospel? Why?
- 2.