

St Mark

25 4 10

Almighty God,
who enlightened your holy Church
through the inspired witness
of your evangelist Saint Mark:
grant that we, being firmly grounded
in the truth of your gospel,
may be faithful to its teachings both in word and deed.

My text may be found in Acts chapter 15 and verse 39:

‘Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.’

The last time I preached here at St Barnabas it was on 18th October, the feast of St Luke; today, 25th April, is the feast of St Mark. Friend and cousin of your patron saint, St Barnabas, John Mark was the writer of the first gospel, traditionally believed to be the eye-witness account of St Peter as set down by St Mark. Mark himself may have been there on the fringe of things in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of Jesus’ arrest, the young man whose loose linen garment is grabbed by one of the soldiers but with the enviable dexterity of youth, he manages to wriggle free of the unwelcome hand to flee naked into the night.

I am very fond of St Mark. I love the legend linking him to Venice, how on his way back to Rome from Aquileia, he was driven by a storm into what is now the

Venetian lagoon where his boat ran around on one of its deserted marshy islands. Exhausted, Mark fell asleep and dreamt the Archangel Raphael spoke these words to him: 'Peace be to you, Mark, my Evangelist, and know that one day your bones will rest here. You have a long life ahead of you and many trials to bear in Christ's name. But after your death, the faithful people of this land will build a wonderful city here and will prove worthy to possess your body. You will be venerated honourably.' In the ninth century, this prophetic dream came true with Venetian merchants stealing the saint's body from its resting place in Alexandria, concealing it with typical Venetian cunning amongst the cargo of pork which the Muslim customs officials would be unlikely to search! Whatever the truth, there can be no denying the splendour and beauty of La Basilica San Marco, the cathedral of Venice, built in the opulent byzantine style and which sits at the focal point of the world famous square named after the city's patron saint.

I love St Mark's gospel: the first; the oldest; the most vivid. Mark's gospel is like a good postcard home: the essentials with some small, telling detail. Both Matthew and Luke use Mark as one of the sources for their gospels but Mark is the original. There are no birth narratives. Mark begins with Jesus' Baptism. We feel we are there, seeing events unfold through the eyes of someone who was there, the eyes of St Peter, but it is the pen of St Mark which conveys the reality of it all. Take just one of my favourite passages: the sudden storm at night on Lake Galilee (Mark 4 v35 - 41). Mark alone includes this tiny detail - the pillow, προσκεφαλαιον (proskephalaion) on which Jesus lays his head. Without the cushion, could Jesus have been so soundly asleep that he was deaf to the storm raging around him? The disciples shake Jesus roughly to wake him. He promptly stands up and tells

the wind φιμωω (phimoo) to 'get muffled!' and immediately the sea was calm. There is a sense of speed and urgency about his gospel. Mark's favourite word is 'immediately', εὐθεὸς (eutheos), which occurs no less than 15 times in 15 chapters!

But what I love about Mark is the example he can be to us all: of what can be achieved in spite of set-backs. Mark has good beginning, he does well but there comes a point when he gives up; he quits Paul's First Missionary Journey at Perga. And Paul gives up on him, refusing to have Mark with him on the Second Missionary Journey and it causes a major split with his friend and partner, Barnabas, who refuses to give up on his cousin. Just as Barnabas had once encouraged Paul by refusing to believe the understandable prejudice against Paul introducing him to the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem so too Barnabas now encourages Mark, affirms his potential, and together they go back to Cyprus to witness to the truth of the Gospel. And Mark does grow in maturity and grace and is eventually welcomed back some twenty years later by Paul, now in Rome, as a trusted companion. He is mentioned in two Epistles: to Philemon as one of his 'fellow workers' and to the Colossians Paul writes recommending they welcome Mark should he be able to visit them. And, as we know, Mark goes on to be Peter's pen, giving voice in written form to Peter's gospel witness.

The lion is the gospel beast which signifies St Mark. The lion of St Mark as symbol is everywhere in Venice not least on one of two pillars at the entrance of St Mark's square by the Doge's palace. As a symbol, it succinctly embodies the message of St Mark's gospel: the good news of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ,

who has overcome the darkness of death to bring us all to the light of eternal life.
Who could ask for more?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Written to be preached at the Eucharist

St Barnabas, Colchester

25th April, 2010

H: Sermon 21: Mark

