



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Saint Mark (25th April) 2024

When you visit a family to plan a funeral, during the conversation, the family will relate a welter of memories and reminiscences about the person who has died. I have long supposed that it is the priest's job not simply to repeat what has been said, but to arrange the material in such a way that something of the person, rather than just facts about her or him, is presented at the service.

When that person has been a stranger to the priest, the framework for the reflexion will inevitably emerge from what the family has said. However, when she or he was a member of the congregation or otherwise known to the priest, the priest brings something of his own familiarity to the task and his words will reflect something of his own perspectives - hopefully insights.

In many ways, Saint Mark was engaged in a similar undertaking - not to create a funeral oration, of course - but to present to his readership more than just a factual biography: rather, to give some account of the Person of Jesus Christ and His enduring significance.

New Testament scholars are generally agreed that behind the Gospels, there was a large body of recollections about the incarnate Life of Jesus - either oral or written. Alongside this, by the time that Saint Mark was writing, there was a developing theological perspective on Who Jesus was - Who He is.

As Saint Mark selected from this catalogue of material, his own theological perspectives will have shaped his choices, quoting the bits, which most clearly supported his point-of-view. At the same time, he will not have had an entirely free hand, because many of his readers would have been familiar with the Subject and would have expectations of what might be included. Never-the-less, the way in which the pieces were woven together will have been done with his framework in mind.

Saint Mark's Gospel is generally considered to be the earliest of the four canonical Gospels found in the New Testament. Whether or not it was the first ever to have been published, so to speak, we cannot know for sure. In all likelihood it was part of a developing process. Many think that in the decades prior to the completion of Saint Mark's Gospel, the somewhat random bits of recollection had already begun to be collected into longer sections of narrative.

As an undergraduate, I was taught that the Gospel form grew backwards - in other words, that the Passion Narrative was created as a memorial to the events at the centre of the Christian Faith; and, as time passed, these accounts attracted to them a sort of prequel in the shape of descriptions of His preaching and teaching work: albeit leading inexorably - and preparing the ground for - the events of the Passion to come. It is quite easy to see why people might think this, but I am hardly qualified to comment on the theory one way or the other.

The important point to take from all of this is that when we read Saint Mark's Gospel, we find more than a simple catalogue of biographical data. Saint Mark has, as we might say today, a take on Jesus, His identity and significance; and this has informed what material he chose to include as well as the way in which he presented it. Like a funeral oration, it does not include everything that was available to Saint Mark - as we see from the other Gospels - but endeavours to provide us with an understanding of Jesus with which we can relate and, perhaps, from which we can begin to develop our own perspective on the identity and significance of the Christ to Whom we commit our lives.