

The Gospel of Mark (5a)

Controversy

Mark's Gospel frequently mentions controversy. Mark wants to depict -

- Jesus being involved in the same disputes that the early Church was involved in.
- the misunderstanding about who Jesus was led to the Scandal of the Cross
- that the stubbornness to understand is part of the evil to be overcome.

The controversy episodes fall broadly into two main groups, each containing five accounts:

Group 1 - Galilean Controversy

Mark 2. 1 - 12	Controversy over healing and sin <i>"The Son of man has authority on earth forgive sin"</i>
2.13 - 17	Controversy over eating with outcasts <i>"I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts"</i>
2.18 - 22	Controversy over fasting <i>"Do you expect guests at a wedding to go without food?"</i>
2.23 - 28	Controversy over Sabbath-breaking <i>"The Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath"</i>
3. 1 - 5	Controversy over Sabbath breaking <i>"What does Law allow? Help or harm? Save or destroy"</i>

Mark's depiction of Jesus has God's power to *forgive sin*; has a mission to *invite outcasts (sinners)* into the Kingdom; his presence should be a source of *joy and celebration*; he is *above restrictions of Law* and his purpose is to *liberate people and bring life*.

This is radical teaching and the authorities can't accept it. They plan to kill Jesus (Ch 3.6) and they send alarm calls out to Jerusalem for help (3 .22).

There are then a few controversies outside the two main groups. They are a *Controversy over the source of Jesus' power (3.22-30)*, a *Controversy over religious observances (7.1-23)* and one over *"proof" of who he is (8.11-12)*. Then comes the *dispute about divorce* we looked at last week (10.2-12). Then the scene shifts to Jerusalem.

Group 2 - Jerusalem Controversy

In this section note how the disciples are only observers. The previous section had concentrated on discipleship. Now they are silent witnesses as Jesus is centre stage.

Mark 11.27-33	Controversy over Jesus' authority The authorities try to catch him out: <i>"What right have you....?"</i>
12.13-17	Controversy over paying taxes The authorities try to catch him out: <i>"Should we pay taxes?"</i>
12.18-27	Controversy over rising from death The authorities try to catch him out: <i>"Whose wife will she be?"</i>
12.28-34	Controversy over the most important commandment. The authorities try to catch him out: <i>"What is most important?"</i>
12.35-37	Controversy over the identity of the Messiah

These controversy episodes are arranged around the **Parable of the Vineyard Tenants** (12.1-11) directed at the authorities. They respond by wanting to arrest him.

The Cross

The second group of controversies are a series of confrontations that provide the background for the final events leading up to the cross. Mark tells us that:

The chief priests and teachers of the Law....kept looking for a way to kill him" (11.18)

The Anointing at Bethany (14 .3 - 9)

- Ordinary people are devoted to Jesus, and he has compassion for outcasts (sinners).
- Jesus' head that is anointed as in the coronation of a King (Messiah = anointed one).
- Mark emphasises it is the Messiah being hunted down (vv1-2) and betrayed (vv10-11)

The Last Supper (14 .12 -31)

The Passover as a Jewish Feast

- The greatest Jewish festival held at full moon in the month of Nisan (*Mar/Apr*).
- Commemorates the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt (*Exodus 12 - 17*).
- Pilgrims flock to Jerusalem for the week long festival. "*Next year in Jerusalem*".
- It begins with with the Passover Meal.
- It was frequently surrounded by turmoil as the country was occupied by Rome.

The Meal from the later Christian context

- Very few details of the Passover Meal are included - not important to Mark.
- The early Christian Church emphasises two aspects of the Last Supper:
 - It's ritual aspects that were recalled in the Eucharist (*cf 1 Cor 11. 24-25*)
 - It's role as a farewell meal. Luke and John include a Farewell Discourse.

Jesus in agony (Mark 14.32-41)

The setting is Gethsemane ("oil-press"). Jesus' agony contrasts with the disciples calm sleep. Peter may have told this account against himself. He is "Simon" again rather than the rock of strength that "Peter" implied. Jesus prays a prayer for times of distress.

Arrest and Crucifixion (Mark 14.43 - 15.41)

- A crowd arrives led by Judas and **Jesus is arrested (14.43-52)**
- **A trial is convened by the Sanhedrin (14.53-65)** during which Jesus is asked, "Are you the Messiah?" and replies "Yes, I am". The secret is out!
- Mark portrays Jesus as Messiah being deliberately rejected by the authorities.
- Jesus is more than a political Messiah, he claims to be "Son of God". Blasphemy.
- **Peter denies Jesus three times (14.66-72)**
- **Jesus taken before Pilate (15.1-15)**. Only Rome could impose the death penalty.
- Pilate asks Jesus if he is "King of the Jews", Jesus is silent, Pilate suspects Jesus is innocent and attempts to free him.
- **Soldiers mock Jesus (15.16-20)** by giving him a kingly robe and crown of thorns.
- **Jesus is crucified (15.21-31)**. The account is very impersonal and may not be an eye-witness account. Fulfillment of scripture is emphasised in that: Jesus is given a drink (v 23), soldiers throw dice for his cloths (v24), he shared the fate of criminals (v28) and bystanders mocked him (v29-32). *See Psalms 22 and 69 and Isaiah 53.*
- **Jesus dies (15.33-41)**. The words "My God, my God, why did you forsake me" are from Psalm 22, a statement of trust and confidence in God. The Temple curtain being torn in two is symbolic of the barrier between God and the world has been removed.
- **Truly this man was the Son of God (15.39)**. The climax of the Gospel when for the first time a person, a Roman Centurian, recognises who Jesus is.
- **Jesus is buried (15.42-47)**. The emphasises is that Jesus was dead and buried.

The Gospel of Mark (5b)

The Meaning of Jesus Death

Mark's Gospel has been described as a Passion narrative with a long introduction. It reached a climax with Jesus' death and then, in very scant detail, talks about a Resurrection. It then ends with the disciples fleeing the empty tomb:

"for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16.8)

For Mark the death of Jesus is simply the inevitable fate of a spokesman for God in a wicked world.

Mark shows the world how it is. People give lip service to God but, when God's spokesman arrives making demands that threaten their way of life, they kill him. Mark emphasises that Jesus death isn't a defeat, but rather the cost of being faithful to God. In a context of a suffering and persecuted Church that is a very powerful message indeed.

Mark emphasises that Jesus was not just God's spokesman but God's Son. The Parable of the Vineyard Tenants perfectly sets up the context of what is to come - Jesus' death.

Mark calls his followers to be as faithful to God as Jesus was. In Mark's view **Jesus did not die in their place to save them from dying**. Rather Mark is calling Christians to be faithful to the point of death themselves.

God's Kingdom can only come about the costly way. Mark's is a demanding Gospel.

The Resurrection

What happened after Jesus was buried?

The four Gospels each have different accounts of the empty tomb and there are also descriptions of Jesus being seen afterwards. The original form of Mark's Gospel, as detailed above, contains no resurrection sightings. It also rests on the evidence of two women, whereas ancient law demanded the evidence of two men.

Just before the end of the Gospel a young man in the tomb tells the women, *"(Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him"* (16 .7) See also 14.28. Mark wants to emphasise that, even in the midst of apparent failure, when the disciples had failed to be faithful, God still wanted them to be part of his journey. In this verse they are invited all over again. The Resurrection is clearly a new beginning, a new part of God's Kingdom.

Ten years before Mark wrote his Gospel, Paul wrote these words:

"If Christ has not been raised from the dead then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe". (1 Corinthians 15 .14)

What sort of reality is the Resurrection?

Some will say it is a physical reality so real that, in a later age, it could have been videoed. Others will say that the accounts are more like poetry or drama, with the writers seeking to describe a reality deeper and more meaningful than physical things can express.

All Christians would however agree that Jesus' death was not an ending, but a beginning. Jesus lives on in the life of his people. We are called to be part of his risen life.