

JOURNEYING WITH MARK

Reflections on the Gospel



James Woodward, Paula Gooder
and Mark Pryce

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*This book is dedicated to Christopher Evans
in his hundredth year: priest, scholar and
Birmingham boy, with our love and respect*

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Preface: What is this book about?



The Revised Common Lectionary has established itself in Anglican parishes (and in other denominations) as the framework within which the Bible is read on Sundays in public worship. It follows a three-year pattern, taking each of the synoptic Gospels and reading substantial parts of them in the cycle of the liturgical year. While each of the three years is dedicated in turn to readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke, during parts of the year extensive use is also made of John.

All three authors of the present book have extensive experience of reading, preaching, leading, learning and teaching within this framework. We have worked in a variety of contexts: universities, theological colleges, parishes, chaplaincies and religious communities. We share a passion for theological learning that is collaborative, inclusive, intelligent and transformative. This shared concern brought us together across our participation in various aspects of the life of the Diocese of Birmingham in 2007, and we started a conversation about how best we might help individuals and groups understand and use the Gospels. We aspired to provide a short resource for Christians with busy and distracted lives so that the Gospel narrative might be explained, illuminated and interpreted for discipleship and service. This first volume about Mark (further volumes dealing with Matthew and Luke will follow) is the result of the writers' conversations and reflects the growth in our understanding of this remarkable text. We attended to Mark's text and examined how best to break open the character of the Gospel. We wanted to offer a mixture of information, interpretation and reflection on life experience in the light of faith.

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Our own text has emerged out of shared study and reflection. We have all been able to comment and shape each other's contributions. We hope that the material will be used in whatever way might help the learning life of disciples and communities of faith. We expect that some of the material might be used as a base for study days and preparation for teaching and preaching.

But this book is about more than offering information and resources for the busy Christian who might want a prompt for worship or teaching. We hope that this book will enable readers (alone or in groups) to enter into the shape of Mark's Gospel; to enter imaginatively into its life, its concerns, its message; and in doing so to follow the particular demands of discipleship presented to us by the Gospel writer. We want you to use it as a springboard for imagination. The people and events of the Gospels become more concrete and vivid for us when we try to bring them to life before our eyes. We want to try to get inside the skin of how the Gospel of Mark gives shape to the story of Jesus and what it asks of us today about how we might follow him. Visualizing the backdrop to the lives, the times and the culture of first-century Israel is like setting the stage in a play. We want you to pay attention to the details that Mark has supplied. We aim to place the Gospel account in its setting so we can enliven our perception of what happened and expand our understanding of the landscape within which the grace of God acts.

As we reconstruct the scene in our imagination we want to apply our mind to considering its meaning. We ask what truth is revealed and highlighted through it. We pray that the Holy Spirit will help us all to grow in comprehension and appreciation of the practical and spiritual realities demonstrated in the text of Mark. Imagination and understanding are part of deepening our encounter with Christ. And with a heart of love we can become more responsive to his word of love to us.

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A short volume such as this can make no claim to comprehensiveness. The criteria for our choice of seasons and texts were determined by our attention to the liturgical year. Our choice has also been shaped by our attempt to present some of the key characteristics of the Gospel.

The Introduction offers a concise exploration of the main characteristics and themes of Mark's Gospel. Paula Gooder helps us into the Gospel through a discussion of Mark's style of writing, the characters he depicts and the shape of the overall narrative, and considers how we might see the mission and ministry of Jesus within the context of the story that Mark tells us. We look at the nature of the good news that Mark shares with us, especially in the light of the cross and the way of the cross. Finally we consider the context within which the Gospel was written and reflect on what we know about the person of Mark himself.

The Introduction is completed with a piece of poetry written by Mark Pryce, who invites us into the transforming power of Jesus and explores how that power might continue to unfold in our lives.

A similar pattern is followed in the subsequent seven chapters, each of which picks up one of the major seasons in the cycle of the Church's liturgical year. In the section headed 'Exploring the text', Paula offers us material to expound the particular style of the Gospel. In the section 'Imagining the text', Mark Pryce's theology is distilled in poetry and prose, offering us imaginative spiritual insights grounded in the Gospel messages. He draws for these on many of the set readings for the Lectionary year of Mark, as they help us to understand the Gospel within the seasonal cycle of the Christian year. These imaginative pieces can be used in services as reflective material for sermons or meditation. James completes these sections with 'Reflecting on the text', in which he offers some pastoral and practical theological reflections that hold together faith and experience. At the end of each chapter, in a section headed 'Action,

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conversation, questions, prayer, we ask readers to consider the foregoing material in the light of their own understanding and experience. These questions might form the basis of group conversation and study.

Throughout we have tried to wear our scholarship lightly so that the book may be both accessible and stimulating. At the end of the book we offer some resources for further learning.

We hope that you will find this book useful and that it will give you a glimpse of how much we have gained from our collaboration on this project. As individuals we write and work in different ways and this, combined with James's change of ministry in 2009, has caused some delays in the meeting of our deadlines. We thank Ruth McCurry, our editor, for her trust and forbearance. We also thank all those people and communities that have enriched, informed and challenged our responses to Mark's Gospel.

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