

Dear Friend

Today - 25th April - is the feast day of St Mark, author of the gospel that bears his name, and also patron saint of attorneys, barristers, Venice, Italy, and Egypt. His symbol is a winged lion, often depicted with its front paw resting on an open book - presumably the gospel.

Scholars are divided as to whether John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, and Mark the author of the gospel, are the same person. For the sake of simplicity I am assuming they are! Mark's gospel is generally held to be the earliest of the gospels. The original Greek is of poor quality. This doesn't come across in any of our translations, which have corrected Mark's grammar - I can imagine his teacher at school saying in his end of term report - "Mark shows real enthusiasm for his mother tongue, but he could do better!"

Mark is presumed to have received most of his material from the apostle Peter, and it is also thought that the reference to a young man running away naked after the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is autobiographical (Mark 14.51-52). If so, it seems to me to be a nice self-deprecating touch.

Mark, known as John Mark, also appears in Acts as a companion of Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey recorded in Acts 12 and 13. In chapter 13 verse 13 we read: "From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John [i.e. Mark] left them to return to Jerusalem." This led to a great disagreement later between Barnabas and Paul recorded in Acts 15.36-41. Paul did not want Mark to accompany them as he had not "continued with them in the work", so Barnabas took Mark with him and Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways.

Much later towards the end of Paul's life, he once again mentions Mark, in his second letter to Timothy. In chapter 4 verses 9 - 11 Paul writes: "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

So something must have happened to reconcile Paul and Mark, and although how this took place is not recorded, I would not be surprised if Barnabas did not have something to do with it! His name means 'Son of encouragement' and he was the one to stand by Mark and support him, a huge encouragement indeed! We all need encouragement in these days - encouragement to keep going, and not give up. Encouragement from family and friends - including, and maybe especially from the family which is the church. Hopefully we are praying more fervently than we have ever done as this crisis continues to cause huge amounts of suffering, grief and pain across the world. Mark the Evangelist, although he wrote his gospel in a rough and ready style, was keen to spread the message of Jesus Christ both through the gospel he wrote and also in his life - sharing his faith with all he met. There is an urgency in the message he wrote, and there needs to be an urgency in us to reach out with the Good News to our world, which is of course, above all else God's world. Although physical distancing might well limit us, prayer knows no limitations. So may we keep going, and keep trusting in God's good purpose.

As well as being the first gospel to be written, Mark's gospel is also the shortest at only 16 chapters. Can I suggest you take some time today to read the whole of Mark's gospel, if possible in one sitting, so that you can sense the momentum of the story, and the vital message the author wants to get across. I promise you will be blessed if you do! Happy St Mark's Day!

Verses for today:

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."
"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."



Mark 8.27-29

A joke sourced from beliefnet.com



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One day the zoo-keeper noticed that the monkey was reading two books - the Bible and Darwin's The Origin of Species. In surprise he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both those books"? "Well," said the monkey, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

May God's blessings be richly upon you today.

With love and prayers

Simon