

## **Ciaran O'Callaghan – The Background to the Sundays in Ordinary Time...and an Introduction to St Mark's Gospel**

The liturgical period outside the seasons of Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter is known as "Ordinary Time." This is a translation of the Latin phrase *tempus per annum*, which means "time through the year." Ordinary Time is divided into two periods. Ordinary Time I is the period immediately after the feast of the Baptism of the Lord up to Ash Wednesday. Ordinary Time II is the period following the feast of Pentecost up until the First Sunday of Advent.

While the Sundays and weeks in Ordinary Time are numbered 1-34, some Sundays are named after the feasts they commemorate. These are: Trinity Sunday, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptizer and the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King. During Ordinary Time II the Sunday Gospel readings are taken largely from the Gospel of Mark. However, there are also readings taken from the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. The liturgical colour for Ordinary Time is green.

You can now begin to read the Gospel of Mark seriously and systematically on each Sunday in Ordinary Time. This Gospel was seen as a bit of an ugly duckling by the early Christian Church when compared with the other Gospels. It was argued that Mark's Gospel was nothing more than a summary of Saint Peter's thoughts written in too-simple Greek, with poor sentence construction and an unattractive narrative style. So, the early Christian Church turned repeatedly to Matthew's Gospel for inspiration and guidance.

As the Church began to grow, it looked to the scriptures for proof-texts for its theology. These were texts that could be used to support its theological positions on many issues. In this regard, Mark's Gospel offered little or nothing. In fact, the Gospel may only have survived because the Church considered it to be a text shaped by Saint Peter's recollections and written in Rome - a viewpoint no longer supported by mainstream Biblical scholarship. It is only in the last 200 years that the importance of Mark's Gospel has been rediscovered and it is now given its rightful status and recognition in the New Testament.

This Gospel has been variously described as sombre, stark and even as the scariest of the four Gospels. It is a scary Gospel because it is dominated by the theme of demonic possession. People in Mark's day used the concept of "demonic possession" to describe any force that enslaved them. They recognized that there were forces in life over which they seemed to have no control. These forces took away their freedom of choice, crippled their human growth, separated them from God and others, and even alienated them from their own humanity.

They also believed in a supreme force of evil called Satan. They called all such forces "demons" and were terrified of them. We recognize such forces today and the slavery they create in us and in our world. We talk about "confronting our demons." We might feel a little too sophisticated to talk about Satan, but we know that the force of evil is at large in the world and it is truly destructive. Mark's message for us is clear only Jesus can free us from Satan and all the other "demons" that enslave us.

This is a stark Gospel because it deals with the theme of failed discipleship. For Mark, it is fear that utterly destroys discipleship. Take a look at Mark 16:8. This is where Mark probably finished writing his Gospel. Notice how the Gospel ends - on a note of paralyzing fear despite the good news of Jesus' resurrection. The abuse scandals that have exploded within the Church across the world are evidence of failed discipleship and paralyzed fearful leadership. Mark's Gospel is a challenge today to Jesus' disciples to follow him with courage no matter how painful the truth or how difficult the journey ahead.

Finally, this is a sombre Gospel because it deals in great detail with Jesus' death. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is also the Suffering Servant. God's love made visible through Jesus' death. is a love that is vulnerable. Yet Mark proclaims that this vulnerable love will ultimately destroy evil and all human suffering.

This Gospel is no ugly duckling. It is magnificent and strong and has much to say to us.

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