



Christmas without the crib? Mark's Gospel in Advent

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Does it surprise you that the Gospel of Mark does not have a version of the Christmas story? Even without a manger, shepherds and magi, Mark still has plenty to tell us about the meaning of Christmas, suggests Peter Edmonds SJ, especially when we read his gospel alongside those of Matthew and Luke. We heard from Mark's Gospel last weekend, and will do so this coming Sunday. What can we expect?

Can we imagine Christmas without the shepherds whom we meet in Luke's Gospel or without the wise men that feature in Matthew? How could an evangelist even write a gospel without a Christmas story?! It's hard to imagine, and yet this is what the author of [Mark's Gospel](#) did. This omission may explain partly why only eight complete manuscript copies of his gospel survive from the first eight centuries; and it may also have cost Mark a prominent place in the old Sunday Lectionary, in which he was read out on but one Sunday of the year.



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three parts offers us solid material for our understanding of Christmas, especially if we permit ourselves to expand them with additions from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

A title for the gospel (Mark 1:1)

We pick out five items for comment in the first verse which reads, 'Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. In the Greek original,

we hear a stirring drum beat in the repetition of the *ou* sound: *archè tou euangeliou Jèsou Christou huiou theou*.

Beginning

'Beginning' is the same word which opens the whole Bible, ('In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' [Genesis 1:1]). That beginning was the birthday of the universe, and if we recall the words of Paul that Christ was the 'firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:15), we are already in the atmosphere of Christmas. The word 'beginning' has other applications, too. It could refer to the persons and events that Mark reports at the beginning of his gospel. It could refer to the whole gospel story as the foundation and norm of our own Christian commitment. It could simply mean that if we want to begin our own Christian story at the beginning, this is a good place to start.

At first glance, the Sunday lectionary now in use for Catholics continues this neglect of Mark. During Advent and Christmas, over a period of three years, we have only two readings from Mark in [Year B, the 'Mark Year'](#). On the first Sunday of Advent, we hear from Jesus's discourse on the Last Days, a passage that does not seem immediately to be relevant to Christmas (Mark 13:33-37). The second passage is read on the second Sunday of Advent and consists of the first eight verses of this gospel. Let us look at this passage more closely.

We may divide the first eight verses of Mark's gospel into three parts: the first verse offers us a title for the whole gospel; the next two give us a scriptural quotation; and the remaining five verses describe the person and activity of John the Baptist. Each of these

Gospel

Mark goes on to speak of the beginning of the 'gospel'. This is a word with a double application. It was used in secular circles to announce an important event such as the birth of an heir to the emperor, so it might have been a stimulus to Mark's initial readers to rejoice in the birth of Jesus simply on a human level. But the word had also been used centuries before in a religious context by the prophet Isaiah: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns"' (Isaiah 52:7).

The word Isaiah uses for 'brings good news' is the word that we translate as 'to gospel'. Luke puts flesh on these words of Isaiah when he reports the words of the angel to the shepherds, 'I bring you news of great joy' (Luke 2:10), and when he records Jesus's announcement at the start of his ministry that he has been anointed to 'bring good news to the poor' (4:18). Words like 'peace', 'salvation' and 'reign of God' are associated with events of Christmas. The angels sing of peace at the birth of Jesus (2:14). Simeon praised God because his eyes had seen God's salvation (2:30). The angel Gabriel told Mary that her Son would reign over the house of Jacob for ever (1:33). We can, therefore, glimpse Christmas in this second word of Mark, 'gospel'.

Jesus

The third word is the name of 'Jesus'. This is the name by which he was known in his lifetime. Mark tells us that he came from Nazareth in Galilee (Mark 1:9), which corresponds with what we learn about his hometown from Matthew (2:23) and Luke (2:4). Information from Matthew sheds a Christmas light on this mention of the name of Jesus by Mark: an angel of the Lord had told Joseph that Jesus would be the name of Mary's child, because he would 'save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). Its Hebrew equivalent was 'Joshua' who, as successor of Moses, had led his people into the Promised Land. Jesus leads us into the land of the Kingdom of God.

Christ

The fourth word is 'Christ'. This is a name we meet repeatedly in the letters of Paul; it has become a second name for Jesus. He is Jesus *Christ* – it is a title rather than a name. It translates the Hebrew word 'Messiah'. Peter, at a mid-way point in Mark, calls Jesus by this title, when Jesus questioned him on whom he believed him to be (8:29). The high priest asks Jesus whether he is the Christ (14:61). This Christ, or Messiah, was promised by God to David through the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7:12).

The same title for Jesus comes in Luke's infancy story; it is one of the three titles that the angel gives the shepherds for the child born in Bethlehem. He is a saviour who is 'Christ' the Lord (Luke 2:11). Again, another gospel helps us understand Mark.

Son of God

The fifth and final term that we meet in this first line of Mark is 'Son of God'. This was a title given to Jesus by demons (Mark 5:7), but the first human being to use it of Jesus is the centurion who had been in charge of those who crucified Jesus. After seeing the veil of the Temple torn apart, this man confessed Jesus as the 'Son of God' (15:39).

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel gave this title to the child who was to be born of Mary (1:35). Matthew applies it to Jesus when, quoting the prophet Hosea, he calls Jesus God's Son when Joseph brings him back from Egypt, where they had gone in order to escape the plots of Herod (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1).

These are some ways in which Mark's opening verse points to the Christmas message if only we are alert to its implications. This approach reminds us that frequently the best commentary on a scripture passage is afforded by other texts in Scripture.

‘What God wrote’ (Mark 1:2-3)

The next two verses are introduced by the words, ‘As it is written in the prophet Isaiah’, and a complex scripture quotation follows. Biblical language does not like making God the subject of a verb, and will, as here, use the passive voice instead. So we may understand, ‘As it is written’ to really mean, ‘As God wrote’.

A close reading of this quotation reveals that it consists of three passages; one is from Isaiah, but the other two seem to be from Exodus and Malachi. The originals of these passages read, ‘I am going to send an angel in front of you’ (Exodus 23:20); and ‘See, I sending my messenger to prepare my way before me’ (Malachi 3:1). The ‘you’ in Exodus is singular: God is speaking to his Son. In the third passage – ‘A voice cries out; “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”’ (Isaiah 40:3) – the verbs are plural. It is as if those listening to the gospel are being addressed, and that means ourselves. *We* are called to prepare the way of the Lord. These three texts refer to God’s activity at various points in Israel’s history: to the liberation of the people from oppression in Egypt in Exodus; to the return from exile in Isaiah; and to the future coming of the Messiah in Malachi.

The lesson behind Mark’s words is that the same God who was active in the past is active now in the story he is about to tell. Two of these texts are illuminated by the later gospels: again we note the verse from Matthew quoting Hosea about God calling his Son out of Egypt (2:15; Hosea 11:1); and in Luke, Jesus comes into the Temple to be presented to the Lord (2:22).

John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-8)

At this point, John the Baptist arrives on the scene. Mark makes clear the subordination of John to Jesus. John’s role is that of a forerunner. His diet and attire identify him as a prophet of old (2 Kings 1:8). He preaches repentance and he baptises, but all this is but a preliminary to the activity of the ‘stronger one’ who is to come after him.

In Luke’s infancy story, there is an elaborate parallelism established between Jesus and John (1:5-2:52): the angel Gabriel announces their future birth; their births are reported; and the beginning of their careers described. But it is also clear in Luke that John is subordinate to Jesus: ‘John grew and became strong in spirit’ (1:80), whereas Jesus ‘increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favour’ (2:52). It was not only Jesus to whom John was subordinate. We later learn from Luke that all who belong to the kingdom are more privileged than John: he belonged to the age of the law and the prophets that had passed. Since then, the gospel of the kingdom of God is proclaimed (Luke 16:16).

Luke will also report John’s role as a preacher of social justice (3:10-14), while Matthew stresses his fiery preaching of judgment (3:7-12). All this activity of the Baptist, as one who prepares the way, points to the corresponding vocation of the Christian to prepare for the gospel through a committed preparation during the Advent season.

So conclude the eight verses of Mark proclaimed on the Second Sunday of Advent in Year B. They provide a starting point for what we will learn later from other gospels, and offer a solid foundation for understanding the story of Jesus that will follow. We will not hear from Mark again until the end of the Christmas season. On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the Sunday that bridges Christmas and what is liturgically called ‘Ordinary Time’, we hear Mark’s account of Jesus’s Baptism (1:9-11), which follows directly from the preaching of the Baptist.

The Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11)

Mark’s account of Jesus’s baptism is the most succinct of all the gospels. Jesus is the only Galilean said to come to John. He joins the sinners entering the River Jordan and is baptised. There is no conversation between John and Jesus, whereas Matthew has John protesting that it is he that should be baptised by Jesus (3:14). Neither is there any prayer of Jesus, as is mentioned by Luke (3:21).

As in the opening of Mark's Gospel, we pick out implicit and explicit quotations from the scriptures which indicate that what is happening is in continuity with God's activities in the past. That the heavens were torn open indicates that the prayer of Isaiah, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down' (64:1), was being answered. That the Spirit descended could indicate that creation was taking place anew, since at the first creation the Spirit of God had swept over the waters (Genesis 1:2). As for the dove, it could be a sign of the new life that Jesus was bringing; a dove brought a freshly plucked olive leaf to Noah as a sign of the renewal of the earth after the flood (Genesis 8:11).

God is described as a voice and as before (Mark 1:2-3), we hear him speaking words of scripture – 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' – in which we recognise three Old Testament texts. There is a verse from a royal psalm, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). We also note the echo of a servant song of Isaiah, 'Here is my servant. . . in whom my soul delights' (Isaiah 42:1). We find suggested, too, God's instructions to Abraham to sacrifice his son, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love' (Genesis 22:2). Through such texts, we grasp that this Jesus being baptised in the Jordan

was both king and servant. Isaac's life was spared, but Jesus would give his life as 'a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). Jesus would later speak of another baptism, his death on the cross (10:39). We now have a better idea of what was implied when the Baptist announced the coming of the 'stronger one' (1:7).

If, then, at Christmas time in this Year B we miss the attractiveness of the drama provided by Matthew and Luke, which translates so readily into the excitement of nativity plays and the artistry of the [Christmas crib](#), we need not miss out on their message if we give serious attention to the brief but profound language of Mark. In the title for his gospel, in the scripture texts quoted, in the two contrasting figures of John the Baptist and Jesus, and in his description of the Baptism of Jesus, he gives us plenty to celebrate in recognising the loving activity of God in our world, a God of whom Jesus said, 'No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18).

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