

Gospel of St. Mark - Week 1

"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"
(Luke 24:32)

Introduction to Scripture

I. DIVINE REVELATION

Because God loves us and wishes us to know him intimately, he has revealed himself to us. This divine revelation comes to us via the Holy Spirit in two ways or modes, namely through Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture (the Bible).

- On a personal level God's word is spoken to our hearts through prayer.
- God speaks to us in human words.

"For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse [speech], just as the Word of the eternal Father, when He took Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men" [Dei Verbum, #13].

II. SACRED SCRIPTURE

Sacred Scripture (the Bible) is the inspired word of God. It is a record of God's actions in the world, of his dealings with the human race and our response to him.

Scripture, then, revolves about a majestic, incredibly magnificent, and wholly breath-taking theme:

- It is the story of our creation, fall and redemption. It's about God's incredible, inexhaustible love for us, and his loving plan for our salvation.

III. THE WRITTEN WORD AND THE ETERNAL WORD

- Scripture is the *written* word of God.
- Jesus Christ is the *Eternal* Word of God.

This close association between God's *written* word and His *eternal word* is intentional . . .”

- Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate.
- “In his humanity, he is like us in all things except for sin.”
- “As a work of man, the Bible is like any other book, except without error” (*ICSB – introduction to Mark*).

A. For the Sake of our Salvation

The Second Vatican Council teaches that since the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, “it follows that the books of Sacred Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the *sake of salvation*” (Dei Verbum #11).

- Both Christ and the Scriptures are given for the sake of our salvation!
- They give us God's definitive revelation of himself!

“We cannot, therefore, conceive of one without the other: the Bible without Jesus, or Jesus without the Bible. Each is the interpretive key to the other” (ICSB - Introduction)

- “And because Christ is the subject of the Scriptures, St. Jerome insists, ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’” (CCC133).

“When we approach the Bible, then, we approach Jesus, the Word of God: and in order to encounter Jesus, we must approach him in a prayerful study of the inspired word of God, the Sacred Scriptures” (ICSB Introduction).

Not wishing to be “ignorant of Christ,” we, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, also burn with the desire that the Scriptures be opened up for us so that we can understand their meaning, their significance, and their message and, in the process, encounter Christ.

For this reason the Church has given us guidelines to help us read and understand the Scriptures as God’s word to us in the words of human beings.

IV. INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

A. Three Guidelines

These guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture according to the mind and heart of the Church follow the principles taught by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* #12.

- First, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express;
- Second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written” - that is, in the light of:
 - the content and unity of the whole Scripture,
 - the living tradition of the Church, and
 - the analogy of the faith

In these deceptively simple guidelines are enfolded, like the oak tree in the acorn, the entire pattern for reading Scripture with the mind and heart of the Church. Let's unpack them a bit.

B. You Need the Whole of Scripture

1. Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture."

Scripture is often treated as a sort of "Treasury of Sacred Quotations." It's not. In fact, as a general rule, the books of Scripture are coherent; they possess an internal unity and consistency.

As in any book, each passage of Scripture relates to the passage preceding it and following it; likewise, each paragraph and chapter. Moreover, biblical writers will often have in mind other books of Scripture as they write. And so they will often allude to these other books with the expectation that we, as readers, will "get" what they are referring to.

- So, for instance, when John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God" as he points to Jesus, he expects us to be completely familiar with the story of the Exodus and of the Passover Lamb, whose blood saves Israel from death.

If we don't know that connection, we won't "get" what John means or, worse, we will think we understand him when we don't.

In other words, Scripture (because God is the Author) has a more-than-human unity to it. We can think of it as a single organism rather than as a collection of separate books.

C. You Need the Whole Faith

2. Read the Scripture within "the living tradition of the whole Church."

Scripture is the result of the Sacred Tradition of the community that made it under the inspiration of the Spirit (see 2 Thes 2:15).

*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** which you were taught by us, either by **word of mouth** or **by letter**.*

Because of this, you can no more read Scripture apart from Tradition than you can talk to a person without air.

- Scripture is simply the written aspect of the Church's Tradition (see 1 Cor 15:3-4).
- Sacred Tradition identifies forty-six (46) books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven (27) in the New Testament.
- The Roman Catholic Church has accepted this collection of books as inspired and normative, containing truths which are necessary for salvation.
- Most Protestant Bibles contain thirty-nine (39) books in the OT and twenty-seven (27) in the NT.
- Protestant Bibles do not contain the following books, which they refer to as **apocrypha**:
Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, First and Second Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel.
- Catholics call these the **deuterocanonical** books.

3. The Analogy of Faith

The third and last of the guidelines is the "analogy of faith" which refers to those doctrinal statements that summarize and symbolize what we believe.

- Every individual statement of belief must be understood in the light of the Church's whole objective body of faith.
- By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence (consistency, unity) of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation (CCC #114).

V. INSPIRATION

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . .” (2 Tim 3:16).

Sooner or later as we study the Scriptures we will encounter the all important principle of inspiration. We will need to have some understanding of inspiration if we are to read the Scriptures and apply them to our lives as the Church intends.

How does the Church understand these words of St. Paul in the above quotation? What does biblical inspiration mean?

Jesus and his disciples referred to the scriptures (the Old Testament) as “God’s word” (see Mt 22:31; Acts 1:16, 4:25; Rom 3:2; 1 Cor 14:31; Heb 33:7). What could be more important than “God’s word?” What could have greater authority?

Since the term ‘inspired’ (in 2 Tim 3:16 above) could be translated ‘God-breathed,’ it follows that God breathed forth His word in the Scriptures as you and I breathe forth air when we speak (ICSB).

- This means that God is the *primary* author of the Bible, although he made use of human authors as well. The human authors are called *instrumental* authors.

Dei Verbum #11 puts it this way:

*For holy mother Church . . . holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety . . . are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have **God as their author** and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.*

*In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, **as true authors**, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted (DV #11).*

VI. INERRANCY

Inerrancy is another important, though complicated, principle of Scripture. The principle of inerrancy follows logically from the fact that God is the primary author of Scripture. God cannot lie, and he cannot make mistakes.

“Since the Bible is divinely inspired, it must be without error in everything that its divine and human authors affirm to be true” (ICSB). This applies to everything “that God wanted put into the sacred writings for the *sake of salvation*.”

*“Therefore since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and **without error** that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings **for the sake of our salvation**.”* [Dei Verbum, Paragraph # 11].

However, the Bible is not a textbook of the empirical sciences and should not be treated as such. In Catholic theology there is no room for fundamentalism. The Bible cannot always be taken in a strict, literal way. For example, we don't have to believe that God literally created the world in six days.

VII. OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF SCRIPTURE

A. Scripture is Transforming

God sends his word to us to reveal himself, to transform us and to create for himself a people. His word is not empty or powerless. It is a life giving and a transforming word.

*“As the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, **so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without***

carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do".
[Isaiah 55: 10-11].

B. Scripture is Powerful

- **The word of God is powerful!**

"Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, like a hammer shattering rocks." (Jeremiah 23:29).

- **It is penetrating!**

"For the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

- **It brings us life!**

"It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom. 1: 16)

Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

I. AUTHOR

It is the Church's unwritten tradition that Mark, a disciple of Simon Peter, wrote the second Gospel. This Mark is no doubt the same John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on part of their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:13). Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10).

Mark had never heard Jesus preach nor was he a follower of Jesus, until he was converted by Peter around 38 AD. His Gospel contains the preaching of Peter.

Mark's mother, Mary, had offered her house in Jerusalem as a meeting place for the early Christian community

- Mark later came to Rome and worked with Paul (Phlm 24; Col 4:10), and with Peter (1 Peter 5:13).
- Papias, a Bishop of the early second century (writing around 130 AD), tells us that Mark was Peter's interpreter; that he wrote down whatever Peter remembered of the things said and done by the Lord, though not in order.

This testimony of Papias is confirmed by other early Christian writers – Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), Origen (186-254 AD), Tertullian (160-240), and others.

Note:

For a short history of Mark's life, see *Handbook to the Gospels* by John Wijngaards (Servant Books 1979).

II. DATE

Most scholars believe that Mark completed his Gospel before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, an event which occurred within one generation of the events he records.

Two factors suggest this date. First, the Gospel itself points us in this direction. In Mk 13 Jesus *prophesies* the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. This was *fulfilled in AD 70* when the Romans armies destroyed the Holy City and the Temple.

- Mark makes no mention of this as a past event – it is prophecy, not history!

Second, prominent traditions in the early church date Mark's Gospel in the late 60s AD, or even earlier. There was debate in the early Church as to whether Mark wrote the Gospel *before* or *after* Peter's death – a tradition that still allows for a date in the late 60s.

- Mark's Gospel was written in Rome as an encouragement to Christians suffering persecution under Nero.

III. THEMES

Mark portrays Jesus as a vivid and dynamic figure who performs mighty works – miracles, healings, and exorcisms. He concentrates on Jesus' works rather than his words.

Mark stresses Jesus' message that the kingdom of God is now breaking into human life, hence the need for repentance and faith (1:14-15). It is a message of incredibly good news.

He emphasizes the humanity of Jesus more than the other evangelists.

- Jesus' teachings direct his listener's attention to the eternal life that he has come to give them;
- His exorcisms and miracles prefigure his definitive victory over sin and Satan and indicates that the kingdom of God is near -

it is being established right now by Jesus' teaching, healings and miracles.

- His healings symbolize his raising of the dead on the last day.

Prologue to the Gospel

I. THE BEGINNING

Read: Mark 1: 1

The opening verses of Mark (1:1-13) serve as a prologue to the Gospel and introduce its key themes. Mark introduces John the Baptist, the precursor and herald of the Messiah, Jesus, and recounts the dramatic events that mark the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

[1] The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

A. The Gospel

Mark tells us that what he has written is the **gospel**, using a Greek word *euangelion* which means good news. God was doing something startlingly new and stupendous through Jesus Christ.

Good news is such a fitting description of his message that his book will come to be called “good news” – a Gospel.

- What is this “good news” that fills Mark with such joy and excitement?
- Do we realize how good the good news is?
- Do we recognize that this news fulfills and far surpasses all the deepest longings of the human heart?

The beginning recalls the creation narrative in Gen 1:1, and suggests that the good news that Mark is about to tell is a new beginning, a new work of God as original and stupendous as the creation of the universe.

It is the news that the long-awaited Messiah has finally come in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He has come renew and

restore his creation, to rescue all nations from sin, selfishness, and Satan, and to reveal the inner life of God to the world.

B. Jesus the Messiah

Mark gives Jesus the title **Christ**, which comes from the Greek word that means *anointed*. In Hebrew the word is *messiah*.

- To name Jesus as the Christ is to proclaim Him the Messiah, the one sent by God to establish God's reign.
- To declare that Jesus is the Christ is to proclaim that he is the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, the promised descendant of David who would reestablish the reign of God.

C. Son of God

But Mark tells us that Jesus is more than just the Messiah, He is also the **Son of God**. This is the predominant title for Jesus in Mark.

- Both the works (miracles) and words (teaching) of Jesus substantiate this claim to divine Sonship.
- The Father will announce this publicly at Jesus' Baptism and his Transfiguration.

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST

A. Overview

John the Baptist's life was fueled by one burning passion -- to point others to Jesus Christ and to the coming of his kingdom. Who is John the Baptist and what is the significance of his message for our lives?

Scripture tells us that John was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15, 41). When Mary visited her cousin

Elizabeth John leapt in her womb as they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41).

The fire of the Spirit dwelt in John and made him the forerunner of the coming Messiah. John was led by the Spirit into the wilderness prior to his ministry where he was tested and grew in the word of God.

John broke the prophetic silence of the previous centuries when he began to speak the word of God to the people of Israel. His message was similar to the message of the Old Testament prophets who chided the people of God for their unfaithfulness and who tried to awaken true repentance in them.

Among a people unconcerned with the things of God, it was his work to awaken their interest, unsettle them from their complacency, and arouse in them enough good will to recognize and receive Christ when he came.

B. Reflection and Application

Do you point others to Christ in the way you live, work, and speak?

III. PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Read: Mark 1:2-8

Mark begins his Gospel with a quotation from Scripture (OT) to show that the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus is something that has been planned and prepared by God for centuries. It is a fulfillment of the Scriptures – the promises and the covenants.

The quotation outlines the mission of John the Baptist and Jesus by combining three OT passages: Is 40:3; Ex 23:20, and Mal 3:1. It begins with a line from the prophet Malachi, which, in turn recalls Exodus.

***Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who shall prepare your way;***

In Exodus, God sent a messenger (an angel) to lead Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the safety of the Promised Land.

Centuries later God spoke through the prophet Malachi to say he was sending a messenger to prepare the way for God's coming to his people.

Prepare the way of the Lord,/ make straight his paths

Isaiah announces that Israel's exile in Babylon is coming to an end, and calls for a straight and level highway through the wilderness separating Babylon and Jerusalem so that God's people can travel home. God himself will lead the triumphal procession back to Jerusalem.

- In Isaiah, preparing **the way of the Lord** means preparing for the coming of God.
- Mark presents John the Baptist as God's messenger sent to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, the Lord.
- His **paths** will be made **straight** – that is the people's hearts will be made ready for his coming – by contrition for sin and the repentance that come about through John's preaching.

These passages summon us today to prepare the **way of the Lord** through faith and repentance. John is the herald who points out the way of this New Exodus, while Jesus is the "Lord" who accomplishes it.

IV. A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE

4] John . . . appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

A. Baptism

The word **baptism** did not previously have a religious significance. “Baptize” was an ordinary Greek word that meant to dip, plunge, or immerse in water.

While Jews practiced ritual washings (Lev 15; 16:4; 24), John’s baptism is distinctive. Unlike ritual washings it is a onetime event; not repeated.

The baptism of John signified the need for inner purity, but did not bring about or effect this in a sacramental way.

- Only Christian baptism cleanses the soul of sin.
- John was fully aware that his disciples must also receive the greater Baptism in the Holy Spirit, which both *signifies* and *effects* spiritual cleansing (see ICSB 1:5).

John’s preaching called forth a response from the people, ritualized in a baptism, which was an outward sign of repentance and their need for forgiveness.

B. Repentance

Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) means literally “*a change of mind.*”

“Like the prophets of old John was calling Israel to a wholehearted return to the Lord, a deep interior conversion through the acknowledgment of their sinful state and their need for **forgiveness**” (*The Gospel of Mark – Mary Healy, p32*).

C. Reflection

What sins am I reluctant to acknowledge?

V. JOHN'S CLOTHING AND DIET

[6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey.

There is a similarity between the clothing of John the Baptist and the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Garments of animal skin were the distinctive garb of OT prophets (Zech 13:4).

The **locusts and wild honey** recall the exodus where they represented God's judgment on sin (the plague of locusts, Ex 10:13-15) and his promises to his people (a land flowing with milk and honey, Ex 3:8).

VI. I AM NOT WORTHY

7] And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

Removing another's sandals was a gesture of humility, requiring one to kneel before another – a menial task reserved for slaves. John sees himself as not worthy to remove the sandals of the "Mightier One" (Jesus), whose herald he is.

VII. BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

[8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

- John baptizes with water as a symbol for the washing away of sins.
- The One coming after John **will baptize with the Holy Spirit** for an actual cleansing of sin and the transformation of the human heart.

Many Jews lived in the hope that God would one day pour out his spirit and wash his people of their sins (Is 43:25; Ez 36: 25-27, etc).

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

*A new heart I will give you, and **a new spirit I will put within you**; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*

*And **I will put my spirit within you** (Ez 36:25-27).*

We can now understand John's baptism as a preparatory rite, a symbolic washing away of sins after repentance, in anticipation of the actual cleansing of sins by the Holy Spirit.

A. They Experienced the Holy Spirit

For the early Christians the Holy Spirit was an *experience* before he was a doctrine. Jesus promised them that the Holy Spirit would do things among them that they could experience. He said:

- They would be "*clothed with power from on high*" (Lk 24:49);
- They would "*Receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you would be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

When the Christians in Jerusalem prayed for courage to proclaim the **Gospel**:

- "*The house where they were assembled rocked; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God **boldly***" (Acts 4:31).
- The Holy Spirit did many other things among the early Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 12:3-11, St. Paul lists some of the gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to the Christian community— gifts which the Church is again experiencing today (**Read**: 1 Cor 12).

- But the most important thing the Holy Spirit did for the early Christians was to let them **experience** God's love for them and his union with them.

B. Reflection and Application

What John's baptism foreshadowed is fulfilled in the baptism of the Holy Spirit by Jesus.

- I receive the grace of this baptism through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and my own **personal** experience of the Holy Spirit – my own personal Pentecost!

Am I willing to take the plunge and allow myself to be completely drenched in the Holy Spirit?

VIII. JESUS IS BAPTIZED BY JOHN

Read: Mark 1:9-11

The Baptism of Jesus is a turning point in his life. In this event he is "anointed" by the Spirit for his mission. His ministry begins when the Spirit descends upon him and empowers him to inaugurate the Kingdom of God - the final age in which God will bring to completion all that he has promised.

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

John's baptism was "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

- As One who is sinless, Jesus has no actual need for repentance (Heb 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22).

He nevertheless receives John's baptism to identify with sinners as part of the Father's plan to save them (CCC 536).

- Jesus' baptism is an anticipation of his passion.

- Immersion in water is a symbol of death, and Jesus will later speak of his death as a “baptism” (Mk 10:38).

[10] And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove;

The heavens are not gently opened but **torn** asunder – a sign that the barrier between God and man is being removed.

[11] and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Baptism of Jesus is a Trinitarian event. The voice of the Father, the Baptism of the Son, and the descent of the Spirit is a revelation of the Blessed Trinity.

A. Reflection and Application

As God's beloved Son, Jesus embodies Israel, who was called God's son (see Ex 4:22; Hosea 11:1) but could never fully live up to that status.

- The New Testament proclaims that all of Jesus' followers have become children of God, participating in his own relationship with the Father (see Rom 8:15-16; John 5:1).
- Thus these words are spoken to each of us as well: “you are my beloved son, “You are my beloved daughter.”
- Only in accepting our identity as a beloved child of the Father is it possible for us too to embark courageously on the mission to which God has called us (*Gospel of Mark by Mary Healy, p 37*).

IX. JESUS CONFRONTS SATAN

Read: Mark 1:12-13

A. Jesus is Led by the Spirit

[12] The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

Having been anointed by the Spirit, Jesus begins his mission to do battle with Satan without delay. Clearly for Jesus, the possession of the Spirit and his designation as God's Son do not spare him struggle and conflict.

By his baptism, Jesus had identified himself with repentant Israel. He now shares the lot of ancient Israel by entering the place where Israel was tempted and failed – the desert (wilderness).

Jesus faced the same ordeal that Adam faced in Eden, and ancient Israel in the desert (CCC 538-540), but Jesus succeeds where Adam and Israel failed.

- This initiates an extended campaign by Jesus against demons, death, and disease throughout the Gospel of Mark.

B. Tempted (Tested) by Satan

[13] And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

- Israel wandered in the desert for **forty** years.
- Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for **forty** days and **forty** nights (Ex 24:18), and
- Elijah spent **forty** days travelling there (1 Kgs 19:8).
- The number forty is symbolic, therefore, of an important period of testing, preparation, or encounter. Here it is primarily testing.

Jesus relives the story of Israel, but as an obedient Son who is totally faithful, unlike Adam and Israel, in his own trial in the desert.

C. Reflection and Application

(See *the Gospel of Mark by Mary Healy* – pgs 38-39)

The spiritual battle is an essential part of following Christ. Indeed, all human history is a story of combat with the powers of evil (CCC 409).

This combat entails both the struggle against our own tendency to sin, and the rejection of Satan and all his glamorous seductions (CCC 2752).

- Following the example of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, we are to repel the enemy through prayer and perseverance.
- Have I had to do battle with evil? What meaning do I find in Mark's account of Jesus' time in the desert?

Preparation for Week 2

- Read Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Gospel of Mark* by Mary Healy
- Read Chapter 1 of the ICSB: *Prologue: Preparations for the Messiah and His Forerunner* (1:1-15)
- Review and answer study questions for Chapter 1 of ICSB on Mark