

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Here Is Mark

This Sunday we begin the ordinary time of the year with the feast of the Lord's Baptism; and we meet up with our guide for this year: Mark, the first Gospel Writer. From the way he tells his story today you can learn a great deal about him. As he'll be with us over the Sundays to come, it might be worth noticing his special qualities.

Question Mark

The first thing to notice about Mark is that he is short-breathed. His stories are told vividly and quickly, the way an excited child tells us what he's seen. Like a child Mark loves to start his sentences with *kai* ("And...") so that every sentence is attached to the one just finished, and we are hurtled breathlessly through the account. It might then occur to a careful reader that Mark is rather a dangerous writer. Has he quite thought out what he wanted to say? For instance, we're told at the start of the Gospel that John was baptising people with "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"; and he then artlessly adds: *Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John*. No word of explanation or qualification; we are left to draw our conclusion: that Jesus was there to repent, and to seek forgiveness. If nothing else could have inspired to Matthew and Luke to rewrite this Gospel, that surely would have been enough; and they each rewrite it to make it clear that Jesus was *not* a sinner and did *not* need repentance. So what *was* he doing there, according to Mark? John the Baptist has told the customers, *Someone more powerful is coming, and he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit*. So why would this more powerful one himself seek baptism of John? Matthew makes John object, and try to refuse, and Jesus orders him to do it, so that John just does as he's told.

A New Gift Of Baptism

I'd say that Jesus' decision to seek baptism was always scandalous. He *must* have done it, otherwise the Gospel would not include it. It would be a lot easier to lose the story and its embarrassment even today; but the Gospel

tells the truth, and we have to come to terms with it ourselves. If Jesus was sinless and in perfect accord with the Father's will, why would he join a queue marked "Repentance"?

To Be With Us

As Son of God, Jesus could not exactly repent! But as a human being, he could grow and learn, and subject his human mind and heart to the divine purpose. Perhaps that was enough for him to feel that this immersion in the Jordan was not inappropriate for him. We only know what Mark thought it meant, after all: we aren't entirely so sure what John the Baptist thought it meant; and we can only guess at what Jesus thought it meant. After all of those, however, I can say what I think it meant. I think John was inviting people to be cleansed in the water of all that does not match the plan of God; he invited them to lose in the river their previous direction and break with their past. The image of a resolute "drowning" of the past might have been involved. The choice of the Jordan was vital: the Jordan was the border of the Promised Land, and stood up like a wall when the Exodus Pilgrims reached it, so that they entered the Promised Land, as they had passed through the Red Sea, "with unmoistened foot". John was offering them a new Exodus, a new inheritance of the promises of God. That Jesus could surely have shared in eagerly. Finally, maybe Jesus himself wanted to be found among those repenting and changing their lives, taking his place with his sinful brothers and sisters; to be one with that humble procession united him with us; to have stood aloof from it could have carried no positive meaning to those who saw.

What Mark Thought

We have little idea what Mark thought as he wrote this difficult story. But we do see here a Jesus who throws himself into the community of failure and of hope, and makes his own the aspiration of his people, to see wonders again, to hear the prophets speak God's word, to find the path to life.

Fr Philip

