

04/25/21

Feast of St. Mark, Evangelist

“Nations who do not know you shall run to you”

Isaiah 55: 1-5

“Ho! Every who thirst, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come buy wine and milk Without cost and without price. **2)** Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. **3)** Incline you ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—The sure mercies of David. **4)** Indeed, I have given him as a witness to the people, A leader and commander for the people. **5)** Surely you shall call a nation you do not know, And nations who do not know you shall run to you, Because of the Lord your God, And the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, April 25, is for the Church of Christ the Feast of St. Mark the Evangelist, and therefore in our worship today—in the readings and the propers and the prayers—we observe that minor festival of the Church Year.

As is true of so many of the early heroes of the Christian faith, we would like to know more about Mark’s personal history. We do know that his mother was an important personage in the infant Church in Jerusalem, and it was to her home that St. Peter went when he was freed from prison. We know, too, that Mark—also called “John Mark” in the Scriptures—was the cousin of Barnabas who accompanied St. Paul on that apostle’s first missionary-journey, and that young Mark went along as far as the city of Perga in Pamphylia. However, there he decided to leave his cousin and Paul and return home. We do not know why, but St. Paul was apparently angered by Mark’s departure. When Barnabas wanted to take him along on another journey to spread the Gospel, Paul refused and instead parted company with Barnabas entirely. It is clear that Paul and Mark were later reconciled, for the apostle refers to Mark in several of his epistles as a valued co-worker and a trustworthy personal aide on whom he could rely.

A very reliable tradition tells us that Mark’s Gospel was written while he was in Rome, and that it was particularly the Apostle Peter who served as Mark’s source for his Book on the Life of Christ. It is especially internal evidence which confirms this tradition. Mark’s Gospel is full of vivid details which reflect the report of an eye-witness like Peter. He includes

Peter's great confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, but it is also especially in this Gospel that we are given the clearest presentation of Peter's weaknesses—his impetuous nature, his tendency to speak before thinking, and his denial of Jesus in the hour of our Redeemer's passion—in all of which we can hear the voice of a repentant St. Peter openly confessing his faults, because he now found all his own value as a person in the cross of Christ, the Savior whom he served.

In our text—the Old Testament reading for this day from the Book of Isaiah—that prophet sets before us in beautifully poetic language the Word of God as the conveyor to us of our Lord's saving grace—the sustenance for our souls which comes to us “without cost and without price” and in which we are made participants in the “everlasting covenant” or testament of our Lord—made partakers of His “sure mercies” which great David's greater Son acquired for us on the cross of Calvary. That is the Gospel—the word about our virgin-born Redeemer—which St. Mark has left to us.

I

Isaiah urges us to receive the real and satisfying Bread which he offers—the Word of Him who offers to us His everlasting covenant of grace and forgiveness and life, the “sure mercies of David” won for us by King David's Descendant who was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, the City of David. Everything that Isaiah says here applies so directly to St. Mark's book, which is one of the reasons why these verses are read on this day on which the Church remembers him.

Mark's Gospel was written especially for a Gentile audience, presenting to its Roman readers Jesus of Nazareth as the mighty Son of God who gives His life that you and I might live. From beginning to end, it is a book of action, emphasizing especially our Savior's works of power which demonstrate His divinity—healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry. Like the other evangelists, Mark shows our Lord always in service to others. Jesus' miracles are never merely for His own benefit. They are all works of His compassionate love through which He helps others and leads them to understand who He is. David's Son secured those “sure mercies” of our Lord for us by leading—as our Substitute under the Law—that perfect life of self-giving love which the Law demands from us and which we can never achieve. That is the movement—the “action”—in Mark's Gospel.

II

“Come,” says Isaiah, “buy wine and milk without cost and without price.” The pure grace of our triune God—His undeserved love for fallen and dying sinners, His free forgiveness for the sake of the vicarious sufferings and death of His incarnate Son—that is the nourishment our souls

must have. St. Mark especially wanted the Christians in Rome to know the story of their Savior's passion by which He purchased that gift for us.

More than a third of St. Mark's Gospel is devoted to the last week of our Redeemer's life—His entry into Jerusalem, the teaching He did during that week, His final Supper with His disciples, His suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, the mock-trials and the torture He endured, His death on the cross of Golgotha, and His glorious resurrection. The all-atoning sacrifice for our sin which the incarnate One so willingly offered for us, and His triumph over death for our sakes—it was especially these which St. Mark wanted to share with his gentile readers in Rome. That is how Christ Jesus procured for them and for us the spiritual wine and milk we must have.

And Mark wanted his gentile readers also to know the Christological roots of their worship. He records for us our Lord's institution of His sacramental meal for His Church; He records for us our Savior's command to preach His Gospel; and it is in St. Mark's Gospel that we find the promise of our Savior about Baptism—“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”—which Martin Luther included in his Catechism in order to teach us the benefits of that precious “washing of water with the word.”

For most of the history of the Western Church, and still here at Old Zion, it has been St. Mark's report about that first Easter morning which has served as the Gospel for Easter Sunday. Every year, thanks to his book, Christians all over the world have rejoiced to hear those blessed words of the angel—“You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here!” That, too, is the wine and milk—without cost and without price—by which our souls live.

III

In his beautiful hymn about the word of God, Isaiah addresses the Church of Christ and speaks about how the Gospel would spread. “(N)ations who do not know you shall run to you,” the prophet says, “because of the Lord your God, And the Holy One of Israel...” That, in a nutshell, was the purpose of St. Mark's Gospel—to share the story of the Gospel with people beyond the borders of Israel, with gentiles, with people like you and me.

A strong tradition tells us that St. Mark became the first bishop of the Church in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and that he died there as a martyr for the sake of his Lord. We are blessed that he first finished his Gospel-account of our Savior's life. And of course, the best way to honor him is to read St. Mark's book. It is the shortest of all the Gospels; it takes only an hour or so to get through it completely; and it is a vivid and action-filled source for us of the nourishment we need for our journey heavenward. May the Holy Spirit grant that to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.