MARK'S GOSPEL

Discipleship and Formation

Peter Edmonds

WE MUST IMAGINE MARK as a pastor addressing his flock. He is like Jesus before he fed the five thousand: he had compassion on them because they were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (6:34) and the first thing he did was to teach them many things. According to a very helpful recent commentary, 'The Gospel of Mark is a written text composed to be read aloud, all at once, in the context of a listening congregation. Mark's potent story cannot be summarised; it must be experienced ….'[1]

Who were Mark's congregation? A common view is that they were a Christian community in Rome in the time of the emperor Nero, who committed suicide in the year 68, but not before he had unleashed a fierce persecution against Christians, who were accused of involvement in a great fire in the city. If so, they had heard Paul's letter to the Romans, but now they were being challenged by another approach to the mystery of Christ—perhaps that of Peter, telling his own story of his time with Jesus through the person described at the end of the first letter of Peter as 'my son Mark' (1 Peter 5:13). Others experts on the Gospel, including Eugene Boring already quoted, prefer to think that the first hearers of this work lived in Galilee or Syria during the tense days leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. They had to learn, along with the multitudes summoned to listen to Jesus' open teaching after he had warned his disciples about his coming suffering in Jerusalem, that 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (8:35).

When teaching Mark's Gospel, I ask students which was Mark's favourite number, and I soon have them replying with enthusiasm that it

This article is an adaptation of a talk given at the Annual Conference of Catholic University Chaplains held at High Leigh in June 2015.

[1] Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 10.

was three. I want to approach the topics of discipleship and formation in Mark's Gospel in five stages, each of which will be subdivided under three headings. One cannot claim with any certainty that this schematization was what Mark had in mind originally but, as an aid to memory, it can help each of us become more familiar with this Gospel as a means of spiritual growth in our own life of discipleship and as a more effective pastoral tool when we introduce others to the joy of this particular Gospel.

These are the five stages or topics: the first is the story the evangelist tells; the second is the portrait of Christ that he offers; the third is his portrayal of those called by Jesus to discipleship; and the fourth brings together various minor characters who enter the Gospel's story only once. The fifth and final stage is the challenge that assimilation of this Gospel presents to all who hear or read it. We can approach four of these five stages in three parts.

- **The Narrative.** Each of those who heard this Gospel might be expected to be able to repeat the outline of the story it tells to those who were not present at its first reading. The narrative falls into three major parts which can be headed with geographical titles. The first part describes Jesus' activity in *Galilee*, the second his activity on *the way* from Galilee to Jerusalem, the third his final days in *Jerusalem*. These parts can also go under the headings of the *authority* of Jesus, the *destiny* of Jesus, and Jesus in *conflict* and his vindication. Introducing these three stages is a *prologue* to the narrative, and completing them is an *epilogue*.

- **Jesus**. Besides knowing the broad outlines of the narrative, those who heard this Gospel would be equipped to sketch out the character of the Jesus who dominates practically every stage of the story. Again there are three headings, roughly equivalent to the threefold character of Jesus' own self-description as Son of Man, which occurs fourteen times in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is, first, the Son of Man with *authority*, as is stated at the conclusion of the story of the paralytic: the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (2:10). Secondly, the Son of Man is one destined to *suffer*, as Jesus reveals to his disciples three times on the way to Jerusalem (8:31). Thirdly, the Son of Man is the one who is to *come in the clouds of heaven* at the end of time (14:62).

- **The Disciples**. The characters with whom the hearers of the Gospel would be expected to identify are the disciples of Jesus. Their chief and leader is Peter, and the most significant in their number are those known as the Twelve (3:14). The three headings under which we can study them are: first, as models or *examples* to follow; secondly as *warnings* of how not to behave; and finally as those *setting out* from a new beginning in the strength of the cross and the resurrection, with Jesus going before them as they move to a new life in Galilee (16:7).

- **The 'Little People'**. If we have done our work well in listing the successes and failures of those whom we may call the official disciples of Jesus, we will have discovered that the disciples come across in Mark much more as warnings than examples, and we can ask whether there are others in his narrative who might be regarded as better models for imitation than those who received a direct call from Jesus. The answer seems to be affirmative once we pay attention to characters who come on the Marcan stage only once, but who say or do something that we can treasure as a pointer to Christian behaviour. We identify twelve such people who can be divided into three groups of four, namely four women, four unnamed men and four named men. Is it a coincidence that twelve is also the number of those whom Jesus calls to be with him on the mountain (3:13)? These are the sort of people to whom the words of Jesus about one of them—the woman of Bethany—apply, 'wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her' (14:9).

- **Ourselves**. The definition of this final group may seem a little forced, but it fits in well when we gaze at the empty stage at the Gospel's conclusion. In the story that we have heard, we have learnt that Jesus was considered out of his mind by his family (3:21) and rejected in his own town (6:6), that he was betrayed by Judas (14:10), denied by Peter (14:71) and abandoned by the rest of the disciples (14:50). Just as we are starting to think that this story really is good news, thanks to the Easter message of the young man in the tomb, we learn that the women who witnessed the crucifixion from afar (15:40) and found the tomb empty (16:1), have also fled in fear (16:8). We are the only people left.

The Narrative

The beginning of the gospel …. (1:1)

The narrative of Mark can be divided into three major parts, preceded by a prologue and succeeded by an epilogue. The prologue is an introductory passage that gives us information that we need to understand what is to follow and which is unknown to the characters whom we shall meet in the rest of the narrative.

The Prologue (1:1–13)

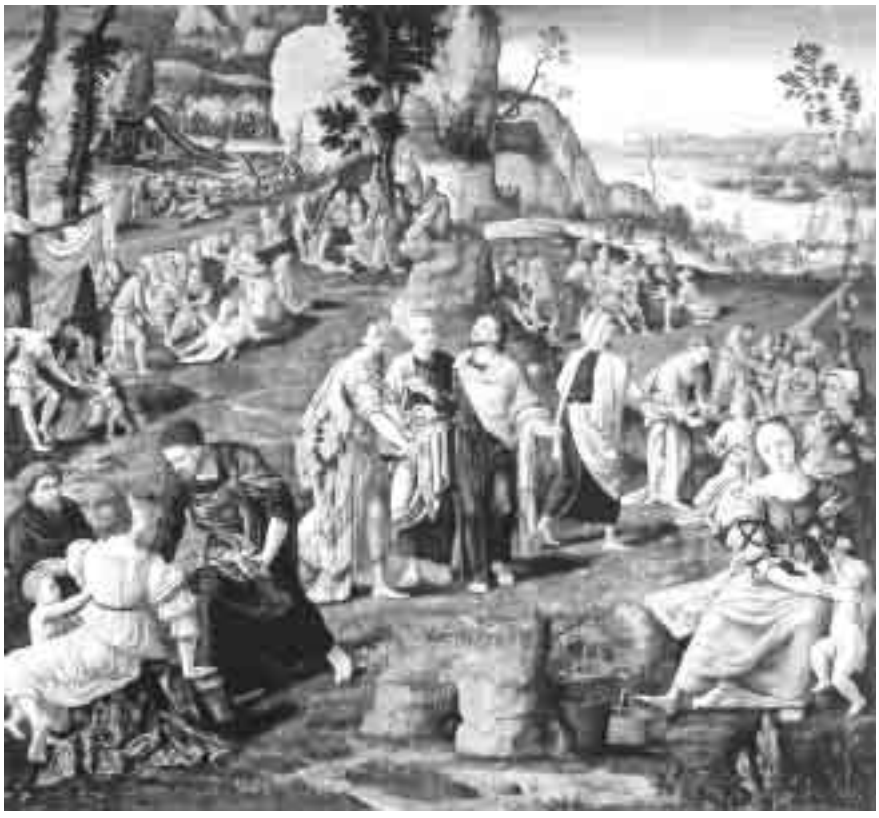
The first verse provides a title for the whole work. It is called the beginning of the Gospel, one of many teasers which Mark offers his reader, for of what is it the beginning? It could refer to the prologue itself, Mark's Gospel as a whole, or even the beginning of our own Christian journey. As for Jesus, we are informed immediately of what it will take Peter eight chapters to learn, namely that Jesus is the Christ (8:29) and, secondly, that he is the Son of God, a truth which will first be announced with human lips by the centurion when Jesus is already dead (15:39).

But this narrative is not just about a beginning. It is the final stage of a story that was told in the Hebrew scriptures—hence the long quotation that we find in the second verse about the way of the Lord. Words from the book of Exodus (23:20), and from the prophets Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) connect the narrative to come with the liberation from Egypt, with the return from exile and with God's promise of temple restoration: these texts introduce this last stage of Israel's history which is the story Mark is to tell.

Then the first human witness appears, adopting the garb and the diet of a prophet. This is John the Baptist, whose words announce the advent of one 'more powerful than I' (1:7). Then Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee seeking baptism and God speaks from heaven, identifying him as king through the words of a psalm (Psalm 2:7) and as servant through a reminiscence of Isaiah (42:1), and hinting that he is an Abraham figure by describing him as the 'beloved' (Genesis 22:2). Finally we hear a brief account of a period of forty days when Jesus is tested in the desert. Like Job, he meets Satan but, like Adam in paradise, he is looked after by angels. Only when we are familiar with the details of this prologue are we ready to hear Jesus' first words, a summons to repent and believe in the gospel because the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near.

Act One: Galilee (1:14–8:21)

The narrative of Jesus' ministry in Galilee falls into three sections. The first begins with an account of Jesus' activities in Capernaum and its environs. We move from lake to synagogue, to house and desert, to mountain. Jesus calls his first disciples and is at once busy with exorcising and teaching. Yet already he meets with criticism and controversy, and soon the Pharisees and the Herodians are plotting to destroy him (3:6). He is sought out by his family; he is so crushed by crowds that he moves into a boat. From there he teaches many things in parables, withdrawing into a house to teach his disciples (4:34). He performs magnificent miracles (4:35–5:43), but when he goes to his home town, he finds utter lack of faith and it is said that he could do no miracles there (6:6). A third division describes the culmination of his Galilean ministry, which includes two miracles of feeding crowds with a few loaves and fishes. Its



The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, ***by Lambert Lombard, early sixteenth century***

climax finds Jesus in a boat with his disciples for a third time, but he has to rebuke them for their hard-heartedness: 'Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?' (8:18). The section ends with a question for those listening to the narrative, 'Do you not yet understand?' (8:21)

Act Two: The Way (8:22–10:52)

Now we concentrate on Jesus and his disciples. The crowds have gone and miracles almost cease. Cures of blind men open and close the section; we learn of the anonymous blind man of Bethsaida (8:22–26) and the blind beggar Bartimaeus (10:46–52). In contrast to teaching in parables, we now find open teaching; 'he said all this quite openly' (8:32). Three times Jesus predicts his suffering, and each time the disciples resist this truth (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–33). By contrast, Bartimaeus makes three petitions and 'followed him on the way' (10:52). Again the hearers of the narrative are challenged: are they too prepared to follow this Jesus on the way?

Act Three: Jerusalem (11:1–16:8)

Now the chronology is clear; we can identify the days of Holy Week. On the first day, Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1–11). On the second he enters the Temple (11:12–19). On the third, he confronts his opponents and teaches his disciples (11:20–13:37). On the fourth, his enemies plot and Jesus is anointed by a woman. On the fifth, he celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples, prays in Gethsemane and is arrested; he endures a trial before the priests, elders and scribes. On the sixth, he is condemned by the Roman governor, executed and buried. On the first day of the new week, women find the tomb empty and are told that he is risen. They are commissioned to inform Peter. But 'they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid' (16:8). And this, according to the best commentators, is where the Gospel originally ended. The audience look at one another in unease.

The Epilogue: An Added Ending (16:9–20)

The style changes here, and the content seem to summarise what we know from other Gospels and from the Acts of the Apostles. The final clause, 'The Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it' (16:20), contrasts with Jesus' words that 'no sign will be given to this generation' (8:12).

Jesus: The Three Stories

Jesus Christ is true God and true man.[2]

In his reflective pastoral commentary on Mark, Brendan Byrne encourages us to ponder three stories about Jesus which always have to remain in tension.[3] This is a tension that remains in all attempts to understand the person of Jesus whom later theology defined as 'true God and true man'.

Story One

Story One is about the 'strong Jesus', the Son of Man with authority to forgive sins (2:10), called by Eugene Boring the 'Epiphanic' Jesus, the one who reveals God. He is the Jesus with the authority that belongs to a divine figure. In the first part of the narrative, this story is typified by the reports about Jesus in the synagogue (1:21–28). 'He taught them as one having authority' (1:22); 'A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' (1:27)

In Galilee, Jesus does what God does: he forgives sins (2:10) and is Lord of the Sabbath (2:28); he feeds multitudes (6:30–44; 8:1–10) and he walks on the sea, identifying himself as 'I am' (6:48), a title reminiscent of God's words to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). In a sequence of four massive miracles, he proves himself powerful over nature by calming a storm, over the forces of hell by expelling two thousand demons at once from the Gerasene, healing a disease that had lingered for twelve years by simple touch and finally raising a child from death (4:35–5:43). On the way to Jerusalem he is transfigured on a mountain and a voice from heaven orders James, Peter and John to listen to him as 'my Son, the Beloved' (9:7). Peter recognises him as the Christ (8:29). In Jerusalem the word *authority* returns: after the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus is asked, 'By what authority are you doing these things?' (11:27–33) At the Last Supper with his disciples, he seems to exercise supernatural knowledge, warning them about what lies ahead, prophesying their apostasy and promising to meet them again in Galilee. Finally, he is confessed to be Son of God by the centurion at the cross (15:39).

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 464.
[3] See Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008), 15 following.

Ecce Homo, ***by an unknown Netherlandish artist, late sixteenth century***

Story Two

This second story is about the 'weak Jesus', called by Eugene Boring the 'Kenotic' Jesus, echoing the words of Paul in Philippians (2:7). He is 'the Son of Man' who must 'undergo great suffering' (8:31). A typical text is the request of James and John, which concludes with Jesus' statement that, unlike those who rule over the Gentiles, the Son of Man 'came not to be served but to serve' (10:35–45, at 45). Thus, in Galilee, after healing the sick and feeding the hungry, Jesus needs to pray (1:35; 6:46). He is angry with the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees (3:5) and ignorant as to who has touched him (5:31); he fails in his first attempt to cure the blind man of Bethsaida (8:24). On the way to Jerusalem, he is the Son of Man who 'is to be betrayed into human hands' (9:31). He is the Servant who is to 'give his life as a ransom for many' (10:45). In Jerusalem, he is 'distressed and agitated' in Gethsemane and seeks the prayers of his companions (14:32–42). He is abandoned by his own (14:50) and perhaps

even by God (15:34). He dies the terrible death of crucifixion, jeered and mocked (15:29–32).

Story Three

There is also a third story which looks to the future, when the Son of Man will come 'in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (8:38). He speaks of this to the inner group of his disciples outside the Temple. He tells them that they will 'see "the Son of man coming in clouds" with great power and glory' (13:26). He repeats this when on trial before the priests, elders and scribes (14:53–65), adding it to his positive reply when the high priest asks him 'are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' (14:61) Jesus says, 'I am', again speaking the words that God used to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). This affirmation is preceded by Jesus' promise that, after he is raised up, he will go before his disciples to Galilee—even Peter who has betrayed him (14:28; 16:7).

The Disciples: Peter, the Twelve

> He appointed twelve … to be with him (3:14).

Jesus is obviously the most important character in Mark's narrative—leaving aside for the moment the role of God. But it is no accident that, right from the beginning, Jesus is never alone, except when the disciples are sent off on mission (6:7–13). He is always accompanied by disciples, with Peter at their head, and, despite their flight when Jesus is arrested, their story resumes in the final chapter. But just as there is tension between the various 'stories' about Jesus, the same is true among the disciples. Sometimes the disciples are examples, but elsewhere their story becomes a warning to Mark's first audience. After all, it was the disciples with whom that audience was most likely to identify. We can consider them under three headings.

As Examples

In Galilee, the disciples respond to Jesus' call by the lake, Peter and Andrew leaving their nets and the sons of Zebedee their father (1:16–20; 2:14). Those appointed as the Twelve are obedient to his invitation on the mountain 'to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have the authority to cast out demons' (3:14–15). To them 'was given the secret of the kingdom of God' (4:11), and Jesus explains

everything to them in private (4:34). Three of them are admitted to the intimate scene of the raising of Jairus' daughter (5:37). They go out on mission 'two by two' (6:7). On the way to Jerusalem, they follow Jesus despite their amazement and fear (10:32). Jesus does not contradict Peter when he claims to have left everything and followed him (10:28). In Jerusalem they find a donkey for Jesus (11:4) and ask for his instructions on where to prepare the Passover meal (14:12).

As Warnings

In Galilee, the disciples fail Jesus three times in the boat. During the storm, they panic and Jesus tells them that they have no faith (4:35–41). When he walks on the water they are terrified, despite Jesus' words of reassurance (6:45–51). When he warns them of the leaven of the Pharisees, he rebukes them for having eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear (8:14–21). On the way, they resist the message of the passion predictions (8:32; 9:32; 10:35). Peter is called Satan (8:33). In Jerusalem, they all fall away and are scattered, fulfilling the words of Zechariah (14:27; Zechariah 13:7). At Gethsemane, 'they all forsook him and fled' (14:50); Peter denies him three times (14:66–72).

Setting Out

But the disciples are not abandoned by Jesus, who promises to go ahead of them (14:28; 16:7). As to their future, unlike Luke, Mark gives us no Acts of the Apostles but, just as he included a large block of Jesus' teaching in his parable chapter (4:1–34), in the final part of his Gospel we read Jesus' discourse about the future, which warns of the afflictions and persecutions that await his disciples. 'They will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings', while the gospel will be preached to all nations (13:9–10).

The 'Little People'

> What she has done will be told in remembrance of her (14:9).

If it is true that the official disciples of Jesus turn out to be more warnings than examples for those who seek to persevere in their Christian life, we can look out for a third stratum in the Gospel which may provide us with edifying models for our own imitation. Each of these enters the

Christ and the Woman of Samaria, *by Paolo Veronese, 1614*

gospel story only once, but says or does something which is a lesson for the reader or hearer, then and now. We may distinguish three groups of four: four women, four unnamed men and four men whose names are reported.

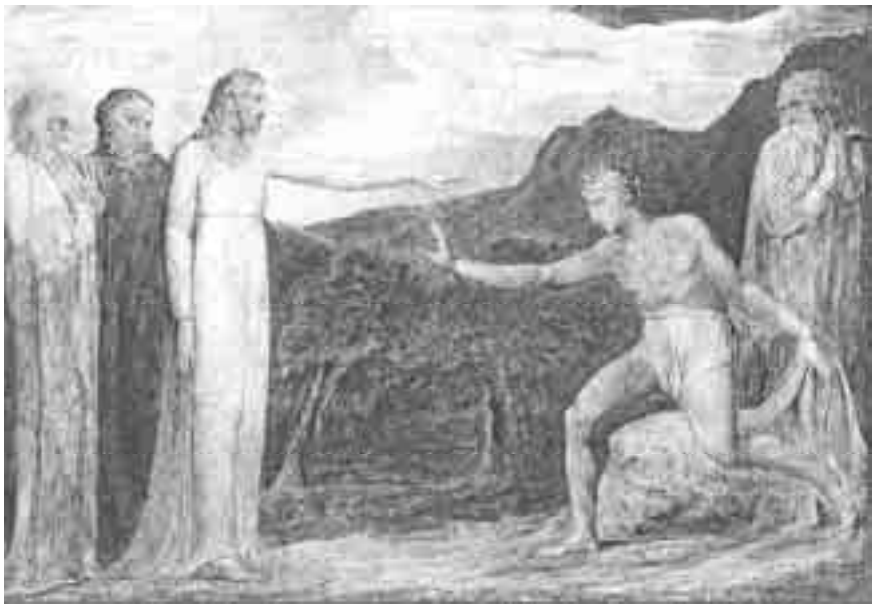
Four Women

In Galilee, we meet the woman with the haemorrhage, who is led step by step from an external, impersonal attitude to Jesus—represented by physical touch—to a personal relationship with him. We learn how interior peace is more important than external healing (5:25–34). We also meet the Syro-Phoenician woman. She is a Gentile, with a lively, persevering and courageous faith in the person of Jesus. She is a foreigner to be accepted and admired. She challenges Jewish Christians in Mark's community to respect Gentiles and women who have accepted Christ (7:24–30).

In Jerusalem, we meet the widow in the Temple (12:41–44): her sacrifice of her whole livelihood and her perfect trust in God anticipate the sacrifice of Jesus himself, so soon to take place on Calvary. Her true generosity is contrasted with the munificence of the rich people who put large sums into the treasury. She also makes a contrast with the rich man who refused Jesus' invitation and 'went away grieving, for he had many possessions' (10:22). We meet, too, the woman of Bethany, who gives an example of personal generosity and devotion to Jesus, despite the criticism of those around. In return, Jesus comes to her defence (14:3–9).

Four Unnamed Men

In Galilee, we meet the Gerasene demoniac**,** who lives on the Gentile side of the lake of Galilee. He pleads to be with Jesus (5:18)—the only person in this Gospel to make this request—and he goes on to become the first preacher of the gospel to the Gentiles. He is given a mission to his own people (5:1–20). On the way to Jerusalem, we meet the father of the epileptic boy (9:14–29). He gives us a model prayer for deeper faith and understanding: 'I believe; help my unbelief' (9:24). In contrast, the disciples are told that they failed to cure the boy because of their lack of prayer. In Jerusalem, we meet the scribe in the Temple (12:28–34), a representative of learned Judaism who proves an ideal student and witness to the intellectual integrity of Jesus. He asks a good question, compliments his teacher, and assimilates and expands the answer from his own learning. He is told that he is not far from the Kingdom. We also meet a centurion, a Gentile, probably the head of the execution squad. After the death of Jesus he makes a confession of faith superior to that of any other person in the Gospel. He calls Jesus 'Son of God', the title with which Mark introduced him at the beginning of his Gospel (15:3; 1:1).



Christ Giving Sight to Bartimaeus, *by William Blake, c.1799–1800*

Four Named Men

In Galilee, Jairus learns that Jesus can raise the dead as well as cure the sick. Through listening to the encouragement of Jesus, his faith reaches new heights (5:22–24, 35–43). In Jericho, Bartimaeus knows what he needs and perseveres in prayer, giving up his cloak—which would have been his most precious possession—and following Jesus 'on the way'. His threefold prayer contrasts with the three times that the disciples reject Jesus' announcement of the suffering that lies ahead of him (10:46–52).

In Jerusalem, Simon of Cyrene accepts his unexpected share in the cross—he did not volunteer—and carries it behind Jesus (8:34). If Rufus, his son (15:21), is the same Rufus that Paul mentions in the letter to the Romans, we may glimpse some family pride in this participation in the passion of Christ (Romans 16:13). Joseph of Arimathea—one who, as a member of the council, had condemned Jesus—'went boldly to Pilate' in order to ensure his burial (15:43), while the disciples fail to do what disciples of John the Baptist had done for their master after his death (6:29).

Ourselves: The Last Word

> So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (16:8).

We have noted above how in the final verses of Mark (16:9–20) the style changes and we learn nothing new. Most authorities conclude that these verses are the work of a person who was uneasy with the abrupt ending constituted by the words, 'for they were afraid'. If this is correct, then vv.9–20 represent a later addition and we must treat the report about the fear and flight of the women as the authentic conclusion of the Gospel. Eugene Boring helps us here as he concludes his commentary.

> Now, the readers stand at the brink of the incomplete narrative in which all have failed, and with terrible restraint, the narrator breaks off the story and leaves the readers, who may have thought the story was about somebody else, with a decision to make ….[4]

The late Cardinal Martini used to speak of Mark's Gospel as the Gospel for catechumens: a document to be given to those contemplating

[4] Boring, *Mark*, 449.

offering themselves for baptism and becoming Christians. Could they accept, with Peter in Galilee, Jesus as the Christ (8:29), and could they confess, with the centurion at the foot of the cross, the crucified one as the Son of God (15:39)? Could they run the risk of discipleship along the path trodden by Peter and the Twelve? How did they reply to Jesus' question, 'do you not yet understand?' (8:21) Were they prepared, with Bartimaeus, to leave their post and follow Jesus on the way that led to Jerusalem (10:52)? And did they flee in fear with the women who fled at the end of the story (16:8)? Did they realise that the Gospel was really about themselves?

Peter Edmonds SJ was born and educated in England, and is a priest belonging to the Zimbabwe Jesuit Province. After studies at the Biblical Institute in Rome, he taught New Testament, first at the regional seminary in Harare, Zimbabwe, and then at Hekima College, the Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya. Now returned to the UK, he resides at the Jesuit community at Farm Street Church in central London.