Who is St Mark?

Feast day: 25 April

Symbol: the lion - symbolizing the might and royal dignity of Christ (Rev 5:5).

Mark’s symbol in art is a Lion, usually winged. In the book of Revelation, the visionary sees about the throne of God four winged creatures: a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. (Compare with the cherubs in Ezek 1 and 10.) It has customarily been supposed that these represent the four Gospels, or the four Evangelists (Gospel-writers). One way of matching them is to say that the man stands for Matthew, whose narrative begins with the human genealogy of Jesus; that the lion stands for Mark, whose narrative begins with John the Baptist crying out in the desert (a lion roars in the desert); that the ox, a sacrificial animal, stands for Luke, whose narrative begins in the Temple, and that the eagle stands for John, whose narrative begins in Heaven, with the eternal Word.

Patron: Attorneys, Barristers, Captives, Glaziers, Insect Bites, Lawyers, Lions, Notaries, Prisoners, & Scrofulous Diseases (Scrofulous: 1. Literally, relating to scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes, particularly of the neck). 2. Figuratively, morally contaminated and corrupt.)

Often referred to as the “evangelist”.

What does scripture and tradition tell us about St Mark?

- St Mark is the traditional author of the Gospel of Mark (written sometime between A.D. 57 and A.D. 63).
- He is generally given the honour of having invented the new literary genre of the Gospel.
- Tradition identifies him with “John Mark” mentioned as a companion of Saint Paul in Acts, who later is said to have become a disciple of Saint Peter.
  - Mark is probably the same “John Mark” whose mother, Mary, held the first Christian meetings in her house. (Acts 12: 12) John was his Jewish name and Mark (Marcus) his Roman.
  - John Mark had not been one of the twelve Apostles but as seen in Acts 12:12 and in some of Paul’s letters, he was involved in a big way.
- He was an associate of the apostles, and Paul and Luke make reference to him in their writings.
Early in the third century Hippolytus (an early Church Bishop and author) refers to Mark as ho kolobodaktulos, i.e. "stump-fingered" or "mutilated in the finger(s)", and later authorities allude to the same defect. Various explanations of the description have been suggested: that Mark, after he embraced Christianity, cut off his thumb to unfit himself for the Jewish priesthood; that his fingers were naturally stumpy; that some defect in his toes is alluded to; that the description is to be regarded as metaphorical, and means "deserted" (Acts 13:13).

SOME EVENTS IN THE TIMELINE OF ST. MARK'S LIFE:

A number of traditions have built up around Mark, though none can be completely verified from the New Testament.

- Traditionally, Mark is said to be the man who carried water to the house where the Last Supper took place (Mark 14:13).
- The house of his mother Mary adjoined the Garden of Gethsemane. As Church Tradition relates, on the night that Christ was betrayed, St. Mark followed after Him, wrapped only in a linen cloth. He was seized by soldiers, and fled away naked, leaving the cloth behind (Mark 14:51-52). The Gospel of Mark, in describing the arrest of Jesus (14:51), speaks of a young man who followed the arresting party, wearing only a linen cloth wrapped around his body, whom the arresting party tried to seize, but who left the cloth in their hands and fled naked. It is speculated that this young man was the writer himself, since the detail is hardly worth mentioning if he were not.
- Coptic Church tradition additionally states that Mark and his mother hosted the disciples in his house after the death and Ascension of Jesus, into whose house the resurrected Jesus Christ came (John 20), and into whose house the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost. The house of his mother, Mary, became a place where Christians gathered, and a place of lodging for many of the Apostles (Acts 12:12).
- Mark is also believed to be one of the servants at the Marriage at Cana who poured out the water that Jesus turned to wine (John 2:1-11), and was one of the Seventy Apostles sent out by Christ (Luke 10:1).

St. Mark was a very close companion of the Apostles Peter, Paul and Barnabas. Mark accompanied his uncle Barnabas (one of the 12 chosen disciples) and Paul on a missionary journey, but he left them when they embarked for Asia Minor – and preferred to return home to his mother (Acts 13:5, 13)! Paul refused to take him on his second mission; this will have been the cause of his parting from Barnabas (Acts 15:36).
• However, they were later reconciled, since we find Mark at Paul’s side again during his imprisonment by the Romans (Colossians 4:10), and Peter indicates in his letter that Mark, his son, is with him in Rome (1Peter 5:13).

The context of Acts 13:5, suggests that he helped even in preaching the Word. When Paul and Barnabas resolved to push on from Perga into central Asia Minor, Mark, departed from them, if indeed he had not already done so at Paphos, and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). What his reasons were for turning back, we cannot say with certainty; Acts 15:38, seems to suggest that he feared the toil. At any rate, the incident was not forgotten by St. Paul, who refused on account of it to take Mark with him on the second Apostolic journey. This refusal led to the separation of Paul and Barnabas, and the latter, taking Mark with him, sailed to Cyprus (Acts 15:37-40). At this point (A.D. 49-50) we lose sight of Mark in Acts, and we meet him no more in the New Testament, till he appears some ten years afterwards as the fellow-worker of St. Paul, and in the company of St. Peter, at Rome.

• Tradition has it that after the death of Peter, Mark left Rome and went to preach in Alexandria, Egypt, where he was eventually martyred.

THE DEATH OF ST MARK:

• About 10 to 20 years after the ascension of Christ, St Mark was inspired by the Holy Spirit to go again to Alexandria and confront the pagans. There he visited the home of Ananias, and healed his crippled hand. The dignitary happily took him in, listened to his words, and received baptism. Following the example of Ananias, many of the inhabitants of that part of the city were also baptized. It was here St Mark formed what is now known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. (Aspects of the Coptic liturgy can be traced back to Saint Mark.) He became its first bishop and founder of Christianity in Africa. This roused the enmity of the pagans who resented his efforts to turn them away from the worship of their traditional Hellenistic gods, and they wanted to kill St Mark. Having learned of this, St Mark made Ananias a bishop, and the three Christians Malchos, Sabinos, and Kerdinos were ordained presbyters (priests) to provide the Church with leadership after his death.
• In AD 68, the eighth year Nero, St Mark was killed.
The pagans seized St Mark when he was serving the Liturgy. They beat him, dragged him through the streets and threw him in prison. There St Mark was granted a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who strengthened him before his sufferings. On the following day, the angry crowd again placed a rope around his neck and dragged the saint through the streets to the courtroom, but along the way St Mark died saying, "Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."

The pagans wanted to burn the saint's body, but when they lit the fire, everything grew dark, thunder crashed, and there was an earthquake. The pagans fled in terror, and Christians took up the body of St Mark and buried it in a stone crypt.

**THE BODY & RELICS OF ST MARK:**

- St Mark's death was on April 4, 63. In the year 310, a church was built over the relics of St Mark. In 820, when the Moslem Arabs had established their rule in Egypt and oppressed the Christian Church, the relics of St Mark were transferred to Venice and placed in the church named for him.
- In 828, relics believed to be the body of St. Mark were taken from Alexandria by two Venetian merchants and taken to Venice, where the Byzantine Theodore of Amasea had previously been the patron saint. A basilica was built there to house the relics.
- There is a mosaic on this Venetian basilica showing how the sailors covered the relics with a layer of pork. Since Muslims are not allowed to touch pork, this action was done to prevent Muslim intervention in the relics removal.
- Copts believe that the head of the saint remained in Alexandria. Every year, on the 30th day of the month of Paopi, the Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates the commemoration of the consecration of the church of St. Mark, and the appearance of the head of the saint in the city of Alexandria.
- This takes place inside St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria, where the saint's head is preserved.
- In 1063, during the construction of a new basilica in Venice, St. Mark's relics could not be found. However, according to tradition, in 1094 the saint himself revealed the location of his remains by extending an arm from a pillar. The newfound remains were placed in a sarcophagus in the basilica.
- In June 1968, Pope Cyril VI of Alexandria sent an official delegation to Rome to receive a relic of St. Mark from Pope Paul VI. The delegation consisted of ten metropolitans and bishops, seven of whom were Coptic and three Ethiopian, and three prominent Coptic lay leaders.
- The relic was said to be a small piece of bone that had been given to the Roman pope by Giovanni Cardinal Urbani, Patriarch of Venice. Pope Paul, in an
address to the delegation, said that the rest of the relics of the saint remained in Venice.

- The delegation received the relic on June 22, 1968. The next day, the delegation celebrated a pontifical liturgy in the Church of Saint Athanasius the Apostolic in Rome. The metropolitans, bishops, and priests of the delegation all served in the liturgy. Members of the Roman papal delegation, Copts who lived in Rome, newspaper and news agency reporters, and many foreign dignitaries attended the liturgy.

The Gospel of St Mark

- St Mark wrote his Gospel for **Gentile Christians**, emphasizing the words and deeds of the Savior, which reveal **His Divine Power**. Many aspects of his account can be explained by his closeness to St Peter as companion and disciple. The ancient writers say that the Gospel of Mark is a concise record of St Peter's preaching. (The Apostle Peter had a co-worker whom he refers to as "my son Mark" (1 Peter 5:13)).
- Bishop Papias, an early second century writer, in describing the origins of the Gospels, tells us that Mark was the "interpreter" of Peter, and that he wrote down carefully what he remembered ("but not in order") the stories that he had heard Peter tell in his preaching about the life and teachings of Jesus.
- The events recorded in Mark cover a period of 7 years.
- **One of the central theological themes in the Gospel of St Mark is the power of God achieving what is humanly impossible.** The Apostles performed remarkable miracles with Christ (Mark 16:20) and the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:11) working through them. His disciples were told to go into the world and preach the Gospel to all peoples (Mark 13:10, 16:15), and that is what they did.
- In Mark’s Gospel **Jesus is seen as the mighty worker** instead of the unique teacher. The servant character of the incarnate Jesus is evident. There is no genealogy, for no one cares about the genealogy of a servant.
- The tone of the gospel is summed up in Phil. 2: 6-8, “but this lowly servant, who emptied Himself of the “form of God,” and was found in fashion as a man,” was nevertheless, “the Mighty God” (Isa. 9. 6) and therefore mighty works accompanied Him, authenticating His ministry. It is a book of deeds rather than of words.
St Mark's was the first Gospel written. Written for Roman Christians, it formed the basis for the subsequent Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It emphasises Jesus' works in and around Galilee.

Bible scholars overwhelmingly agree that the Gospel of Mark was the first gospel written. It is also evident that Mark was the resource text used by Matthew and Luke in compiling their own accounts of Jesus' life. The likely year of its composition is 65 AD. It is also believed that this Gospel was originally penned in Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire, the language of the Roman Christians.

This particular Mark is probably the same “John Mark” whose mother, Mary, held the first Christian meetings in her house. (Acts 12: 12) John was his Jewish name and Mark (Marcus) his Roman.

Why was this account only written in 65AD and not earlier if the crucifixion took place around 30 AD? The Apostles and other eyewitnesses had been spreading the gospel ever since the first Christian Pentecost. A written record was not really needed since Jesus’ companions were able to give first hand testimony about what they saw and heard. There were some writings already in circulation, which documented many of Christ’s sayings and miracles. The eyewitnesses were getting older and no actual written account of Jesus’ life had been undertaken.

John Mark, our author, had not been one of the twelve Apostles but as seen in Acts 12:12 and in some of Paul’s letters; he was involved in a big way. (Philemon 24; Col. 4: 10) It was John Mark who left for Cyprus with Bamabas when Paul and Bamabas went different ways. (Acts 15: 39) The argument between Paul and Bamabas was actually about John Marks worthiness to continue on the missionary journey.

Mark accompanied Paul until the latter was martyred. Mark also associated closely with Peter (1 Peter 5:13) as sort of an interpreter. It is now understood that most of what Mark wrote down was as a result of Peter’s testimony and reflects his perspective on Jesus activities. But Peter was also crucified; according to tradition he was hung upside down. The deaths of Peter and Paul no doubt spurred Mark on to write it all down before it disappeared or became distorted by the unreliability of oral tradition only. Some speculate that John Mark may have witnessed the crucifixion.

The Gospel may have been written at the request of Roman Christians who wanted an account of Peter’s preaching. As a result of his close associations with Paul, Peter and other missionaries Mark was no doubt very familiar with Jesus’ Galilean ministry. One notable feature Mark’s gospel is its emphasis on the activities of Jesus. The
teachings of Jesus are curiously absent and we wonder whether this was because other existing writings already dealt with them. The sayings of Christ were certainly in wide circulation orally.

The reason that Mark’s Gospel is generally credited with first authorship is the phenomenon of the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospel, along with Mark’s are called the Synoptic Gospels. That is because they reflect many of the same sayings and stories with a similar chronology. Much of Matthew and Luke’s work is based on, and even copied from Mark. Mark’s gospel is the shortest of the three. Matthew and Luke embellished Mark’s work, especially in the area of teaching. Either Matthew or Luke had access to information that Mark wasn’t aware of or chose not to include. Mark’s account was written while there were still many witnesses alive that could have challenged any spurious information had Mark included any.

One of the big questions asked today is, why didn’t Mark write anything about Jesus’ life before the start of his public ministry? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were evangelists. These four men were not historians. They did not compile these accounts as a historian would. They were concerned with salvation and with what Jesus said and did in connection with this spiritual goal. What kind of home life Jesus led, his education and upbringing were not of interest in a spiritual growth sense.

Each Gospel writer slanted his account depending on his perceived audience. Mark’s testimony was written for the persecuted Church in Rome. His Gospel addresses their concerns and was especially relevant for them. Matthew, with his abundance of Old Testament quotations, was written to persuade the Jewish world that Jesus was their Messiah. Mark often explained Jewish customs; Matthew didn’t have to. Luke, as a gentile and a physician, wrote to an intelligent gentile world to convince them that this new Way was not simply another Jewish sect.

The Gospel is the story of Jesus the man. There is no account of his birth. The narrative begins with the baptism by John the Baptist and carries on to his crucifixion and resurrection. The beginning is set in Judea and describes the activities of John the Baptist, Jesus’ baptism, and the temptation by Satan in the desert. The ministry begins in Galilee and then spreads to different locations, especially around the Lake of Galilee. Jesus embarks on a teaching and healing ministry there. He heals, casts out demons and assembles his band of twelve apostles. The Parables are presented in rapid-fire order in chapter 4: The Parable of the Sower (4:3-9), The Parable of the Lamp (4:21-25), The Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29) and The Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32).
He confronted the religious establishment and quietly prepared his disciples for the upcoming trial and crucifixion. He later goes south to the region of Judea, and from Mark 11:11 to the end his activities are centred in and around Jerusalem. In Jerusalem Jesus is arrested, crucified, and buried. Three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome go to Jesus tomb to care for his body. (16:1) The stone is rolled away and an angel in the tomb reveals to the three what has happened.

The ending of this Gospel is quite abrupt. Whereas the other three Gospels give accounts of Jesus’ resurrection and subsequent appearances, Mark is silent on these matters. One has to wonder why. Verses 9-20 do not appear in all New Testaments and where they do it is with the notation: “The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16: 9-20” or something similar. The common theory is that someone added these verses to later manuscripts filling in the missing details.

Of course, Mark makes the point that Jesus is risen. The stone has been rolled away and an “angel” advises the three women “He has risen! He is not here” (Mk. 16: 6) 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8 is actually the first written account of Jesus’ resurrection, not any of the Gospels. We’d have to assume that Mark felt that he’d made his point and that the Resurrection was accepted knowledge at that time.