

Dear Friends,

For most of the Church's year the Gospels that we read and hear on Sundays are drawn from the Gospels according to St Matthew and St Luke. In the period between Easter and Pentecost we read from St John's Gospel. But it is only in Lent that the readings are taken from St Mark's Gospel.

It struck me recently that this period of lockdown, when many are feeling deprived of Church attendance, could provide us with a very good opportunity to (re)acquaint ourselves with the Gospels, and that St Mark's Gospel would be an ideal starting point.

Why St Mark? Firstly, because it is short! Looking at the pocket-sized New Testament on my desk it covers 33 pages, compared with 50 or more for the other Gospels. Secondly, because it is the most direct of the Gospels. St Mark is very fond of telling us that things happened "immediately", one after the other. In telling the story he begins at a rapid pace and doesn't let up until he gets to the end. Thirdly, because according to the traditional account St Mark wrote down what he had heard St Peter proclaim as he travelled around with him over a number of years. So when we hear the story told by St Mark we are close to hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ as it was originally proclaimed by the leader of the apostles. And finally, because, as I have already said, it is the Gospel from which our Saturday and Sunday readings are taken during Lent.

How can we read it? First, of course, we need to have a text. Some of us have Bibles at home, but some do not. But in this age of the internet that need not be a problem. Bible Gateway, for example, gives us access to many different translations of the Bible in many different languages.

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/>) In English there are a number of versions that can be recommended: if you are reading as a family with young children the Contemporary English Version (CEV) or the Good News Translation (GNT) are good places to start (both of these translations were designed to be read by people whose first language was not English, so the vocabulary and sentence structure are clear and simple.) Other good translations are the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the English Standard Version (ESV) and the New International Version (NIV). If you want to study the text more closely the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) has many helpful footnotes, but I advise familiarising ourselves with the story first. All of these versions are available via the drop-down menu at Bible Gateway.

Secondly, we need to decide how much time we can give to reading. For all of us the answer will be different. In the early Church, according to St Justin Martyr, the scriptures were read for as long as there was time. We have become used to hearing very small extracts as part of the Liturgy. It might be good if we now have a little more time to try to read more than a few verses at a time. St Mark has 16 chapters. One chapter per day would mean that we had read the whole Gospel by just before Easter. Two chapters per day would enable us to read it twice by then., and so on. (Let it never be said that one reading will exhaust the riches of the text!)

And if we cannot sit down with a book or read a screen we might still be able to find time to listen to someone else reading for us. I was in the audience for this reading by David Suchet at St Paul's Cathedral 3 years ago (<https://youtu.be/JjOgcMQXvSc>) and I found that the experience of hearing the whole Gospel in a little less than two hours (the actual reading begins at about 8:30) taught me new things about both the story of Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel.

May God bless us all, and may he continue to lead us into his truth.

Fr Ian