

Worship with the Gospels - MARK

Background: These resources were first produced by Clare Amos for 'Partners in Learning' an ecumenical resource of learning resources for all ages based on the lectionary readings and themes. They have been adapted here as a resource to encourage congregations to bring 'the particular interests, topics and concerns of each gospel writer' into our worship. We would be delighted if you want to use and adapt the material for use in worship or in Christian education. Please can you ensure that Clare and The Bible in the Life of the Church project are credited

Series Introduction

We have four gospels, each of which sheds different light on our portrait of Jesus. In these resources for worship we seek to experience the feel of each of the gospels, enjoying them as we use them to lead us closer to God in worship. The philosophy that under girds these resources is that there should not be a rigid separation in church life between 'worship' and 'learning' and that ideally worship can be a means and tool for learning about the Christian faith.

The resources explore each of the gospels within the context of worship. It is one of the glories of the Christian faith that the story of Jesus is told in four different gospels - the words of each emphasizing different features of the portrait of Jesus - whose portrait they are all seeking to paint. Way back in the early history of the Christian church Irenaeus, one of the greatest theologians of the second century AD, commented that it was appropriate for the church to have four (*rather than one*) gospels because there are 'four winds' and 'four corners of the earth'. And though today we might put things slightly differently - none the less Irenaeus' words, though quaint, have a ring of truth. The person of Jesus Christ is so multi-faceted and so compelling that no one human author could hope to give us a total picture. We need the different insights of the four gospel writers to fill in the brush strokes and varied hues and colours that would be too great a task for one writer alone.

Taking the gospels into our worship

So each of these four resource outlines takes one of the gospels and looks at the particular interests, topics and concerns of that gospel writer. But we do so in what we believe is a particularly unusual and creative way. We use the topics and interests of that gospel writer to provide the actual structure for worship. As the worship develops we travel with that gospel writer through his presentation of the life of Jesus. In doing this we believe we are being true to the purpose of the gospel writers. They were not interested in writing a narrowly 'historical' life of Jesus. Instead they wanted their readers to soak themselves in the story of Jesus in such a way that they too became part of that story, positioning themselves alongside Jesus' first disciples, and equally so that the life of Jesus did not remain as something in the past, but became present and even future in the living experience and worship of the church.

There is a view held by some biblical scholars that the gospels themselves came to birth through the retelling of the story of Jesus in the weekly worship of the early church. Whether or not this is precisely true (*and it may of course be true for some but not for others*) the structure of the gospels does resonate with the typical pattern of Christian worship: beginning with a call of challenge, they then present the good news of what God has done in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and finally move towards commissioning the disciples to go out and continue the ministry of Jesus in their own lives.



What each writer tells us about the Eucharist

At the heart of our worship, and a model established by Jesus himself, is the service of Communion or the Eucharist. So perhaps it is not surprising that as we explore the gospels through worship we find ourselves led each week towards a celebration of Communion, and have the chance to discover the distinctive insights that the individual gospel writers have to share about this central act of Christian worship.

- In Mark we discover that Communion leads us back to remember more deeply the death of Christ and live the marks of the Cross in our own lives.
- In Luke we are encouraged to experience Communion as a sign of the hospitality and fellowship that friends of the risen Jesus are called to show to each other.
- In Matthew we are helped to understand that Communion also has a forward looking emphasis - it is a foretaste of the heavenly feast with which God will one day feed all people.
- In John we see the church's celebration of Communion acts as a link between time and eternity.

The Communion focus of each week is not essential to the resources. Churches that would not wish to celebrate Communion each week can draw from the prayers and readings offered to develop an interesting theme that can teach a great deal about the special concerns of each of the gospel writers. While these resources are primarily about the four gospels churches that wish to explore together more deeply the meaning of Communion could also use them.

Each 'resource file' provides an overview of the way the gospel writer was trying to get his message across; ideas and suggestions for how these ideas might be incorporated into a Communion service; and suggestions for hymns, songs, prayers etc that might be used. As the original writing was for the British churches there may be better material for your context. These outlines are offered with the invitation to adapt them to your situation so that, wherever we are, we might hear Scripture speaking into our context more clearly.

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Mark – Breaking of Bread

Overview of Mark's Gospel

'A Passion narrative with an extended introduction' is how Mark's gospel has famously been described. Certainly the story of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion occupies proportionately greater space in this gospel than it does in any other. But the shadow of the passion casts itself back much further than the point of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is there in the weighty predictions of the suffering of the Son of Man that Jesus reiterates in chapters 8-10. It is there in the hostility that the ministry of Jesus seems to engender almost from its beginning. (See Mark 3.1-6). It is there - subtly - in the brief comment that Jesus' ministry is inaugurated after John the Baptist had been arrested. For John is the fore-runner, the one who, quite literally, will travel the same road or 'way' before Jesus, a road that will inevitably lead for both of them to arrest and to unjust execution.

Mark's gospel begins breathlessly. He hasn't got time for a proper sentence, he wants to set us 'immediately' (*one of his favourite words!*) on the 'way' following Jesus just as John the Baptist had travelled before him. The speed continues unabated up till 3.6 when we hear of the plot that is already being hatched against Jesus. At this point we could almost 'fast forward' to the Passion, or at least to the moment when, after his transfiguration, Jesus sets out on his journey to Jerusalem.

But then suddenly the pace changes. Jesus starts telling stories about seeds and grain and wandering round almost in circles about the Galilean country-side and lake. And things keep repeating themselves: in chapters 6 - 8 of the gospel there is a sequence of things that happen twice - two feedings of a crowd, two crossings of the lake, two healings of a person with disability, two comments by Jesus about the Pharisees. We begin to wonder if Mark has lost the thread of the story, or at the very least to feel decidedly irritated with Jesus' disciples who seem to be fumbling around with almost unbelievable incomprehension and slowness. Jesus himself gets pretty fed up with them too! 'Why are you still talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see?' (Mark 8.17-18). And now we begin to glimpse the reason for the plodding and repetitious feel of the previous chapters - it is a token of the time the disciples have taken and the difficulty they have had in coming to realise just who Jesus is.

But there has also been another theme that has been playing around these chapters - and which is alluded to in Jesus' comments in 8.17. It is no accident that the 'parable chapter' (Mark 4) concentrates on seeds which grow. For seeds turn into grains which are then harvested and transformed into bread, and bread can be broken and shared. That process lies at the very heart of Mark's gospel. In a symbolic sense the 'harvest' that comes from the 'seeds' sown by Jesus in his parables (4.1-20, 26-32) provides the bread that he later uses to feed the crowds (6.30-44, 8.1-10). On both occasions after the feeding there are broken pieces left which are then gathered into baskets. These broken pieces clearly seem to be significant - at least Jesus in Mark 8.19-21 suggests so: 'Do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? They said to him 'Twelve' 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' And they said to him 'Seven.' And he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'

Just before Jesus has uttered this rebuke to his disciples we have been told rather cryptically that the disciples have 'one loaf with them in the boat' (8.14) and yet seem to think that they have no bread at all (8.16-17). For Mark, the one loaf is Jesus himself: as will



become clear at the Last Supper, when the 'secret' will be revealed and Jesus offers his body to be broken and shared among his disciples. For the moment the disciples do not understand, and we, Mark's readers, only have glimmerings of the truth.

The pace changes once again as with a flash of inspiration Peter proclaims the identity of Jesus, and the truth of his illumination is confirmed by the sight of the transfigured Jesus on the mountain. Helter-skelter Jesus and his disciples come down the hill and start determinedly on the journey to Jerusalem. In one sense we have now speeded up but somehow the disciples still seem to be taking one step backwards for every two steps forward, while Jesus is fast disappearing as he pushes on ahead of them (10.32-34). The problem now it not that they do not know who Jesus is - but that they are unwilling to acknowledge what it means for him - or them. They flounder around, putting their foot in it and then jumping in after! They are hardly on the 'way' of Jesus at all, in contrast to Bartimaeus who races after Jesus with an almost profligate abandonment (10.52). And intriguingly in these chapters (9-16) the motifs of grain, seed, bread and eating gets replaced by cup, fruit of the vine and drinking which become prominent (eg 9.41, 10.38, 12.1-2, 15.36).

The Last Supper

We are being led towards the moment when the pieces of the picture will be joined up, when fragments of bread and a cup of wine will be used by Jesus as his farewell gesture to his disciples, as he now makes clear the 'mystery' of the Kingdom. For with his gestures at the Last Supper Jesus consecrates not only the bread and wine before him, but also the words and actions of his entire ministry. The secret of the Kingdom is both that the Kingdom depends on Jesus himself, and also that the inauguration of the Kingdom will involve the breaking of the bread of Jesus' body and the shedding of the wine of his blood.

So Jesus walks out into the night and towards his death. But it is not the end. No. He dies with the words of Psalm 22 on his lips, but though Psalm 22 begins with that terrible cry of isolation 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', it eventually expands into a marvellously inclusive hymn of praise. All humanity, to the ends of the earth and from the past and future are summoned to share in God's praise. Those who praise are called 'the seed' (Psalm 22.23). For Mark and the Christians for whom he wrote they were regarded as the literal 'seed' of the psalm's righteous sufferer - Jesus himself - who had been sown in the darkness of death to become fruit, to be broken and shared among his disciples. So what Mark is trying to tell us is that the story of sowing and being sown must start all over again. The 'many' disciples who have benefited from the bread and wine given for them, themselves are now to become both sowers and seed - in turn yielding fruit, in turn to become part of the one loaf, one body, in turn then to be broken and shared in a circle that becomes wider and wider.

Notoriously Mark's gospel has an unfinished feel. Mark 16.8 is not the normal way to end a book, or even a chapter. But that unfinished ending is deliberate. For Mark wants to tell us that the resurrection of Jesus is unfinished. It is to be worked out in the lives and the witness of Jesus' first disciples, the 'seed', who are called to return to Galilee with Jesus still going ahead of them. Yet when they arrive in Galilee their job will be symbolically to travel to Jerusalem once more (there are lots of links between Mark 16.1-8 and Mark 10.32-34), and this time not to run away but themselves be 'sown' as they live in their lives the truth of Jesus' solemn words: 'If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8.34).



We have given this extensive information about the gospel, because to understand this gospel we need to appreciate the 'movement' of Mark's story. It is this movement: immediacy/sowing/ breaking/sharing/starting again that we are attempting to convey in the worship resources we have provided for today. Our key gospel passage for Mark is the account of the Last Supper Mark 14.12-28 though we also use and allude to several other parts of the gospel. For this gospel in which the Passion of Jesus is so central it is right that our worship should be centred round the events immediately preceding Jesus' death, and remind ourselves that a key (*the key?*) incentive for Communion is to remember this death. Mark also emphasises the link between Communion and the Jewish Passover : Christ is, like the Passover Lamb, to be broken and eaten to inaugurate a new 'covenant' between God and human beings, and like the Passover his sacrifice must be 'remembered'.

Taking Mark into our worship - some suggestions

Introduction – Prepare the way

You will clearly need to find a point at or near the beginning of the service to explain what is happening. If you have access to cooking facilities an effective way of beginning the service would be with someone publicly kneading dough, for its final kneading, and then removing it for cooking, to be used in the Communion later on.

Whether or not this is possible then use a chant based on 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord': eg Godspell/Jesus Christ Superstar or 'Make way, make way' (RS, JP, LP) sung several times by all. Then one voice proclaims:

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee saying: The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand, Repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1.14-15).

As these words are read someone walks quite quickly from the back to the front of the church, scattering seeds (of corn if possible) over the congregation with powerful gestures. Ask people to pick up the seeds, and share them around so that everyone can hold up a grain.

Prayer of confession

Leader: Let us reflect for a moment on our lives into which the seed of the word of God has fallen.
Perhaps there have been times when we have been like rocky ground, hard and unreceptive.
Perhaps there have been times when thorns and cares have almost choked the life out of our faith.
Perhaps there have been times when we barely listened at all, before our attention turned aside to what seemed then more important matters.
We acknowledge all this, but yet we also give you thanks, O God, that you in your grace have seen hope and possibility in us, and have given us the opportunity to grow in the life of faith and to bear fruit for your glory.

Pause for a moment of silence while people reflect and then the following is read:

Leader: Glory to you:
New Covenant Maker,
Sower of Seeds,
for whom and through whom, all things exist.



People: We thank you for re-creating us.

Leader: Glory to you:
Christ of the Field,
Nurturer of seedlings,
pointing to the possibilities of growth.
People: We thank you for being with us.

Leader: Glory to you:
Harvesting Spirit,
Winnower of husk and chaff,
blowing through our hopes for today.
People: We thank you for renewing us.

Leader: *(gesturing to include everybody)*
To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God.

What do people think that the 'secret' is? Let's try and solve it! We have a quiz to help us.

(This was first used in Partners in Learning February 1998 in a theme called 'Mark, man of mystery' but it is appropriate to use again, even by those who did that theme.)

Activity: Mystery Quiz *(Do it in small groups; people will need Bibles to help.)*

1. What do seeds of corn grow into? *(Answer: Wheat and Barley)*
2. What staple food do you make with the answer to Question 1? *(Answer: Bread)*
3. What did Jesus break into pieces and share to feed a lot of people? *(Answer: Bread or loaves)*
4. Why does Jesus get cross with his disciples in a boat when they claim that they have no bread with them. Read Mark 8. 14-17 to help you find out? *(Answer: Because Jesus himself is 'Bread' although the disciples have failed to realise it.)*
5. Who did Jesus say was the 'Bread of Life' in John 6.35? *(Answer: Himself)*
6. What did Jesus break and share with his friends on the night before he was killed? *(Answer: Bread)*
7. What did he say as he was doing the action in Question 6? *(Answer: This is my body.)*
8. What does John 12.24 say has to happen to a seed? *(Answer: Fall into the ground and die.)*
9. The story in Mark 4.14 says that the seed is the 'word of God.' Who or what does John 1.14 tell us is 'the Word of God' become a human being? *(Answer: Jesus himself)*
10. So who or what is the seed? *(Answer: Jesus himself)*

Pause for a moment - are people beginning to guess the secret? Put as simply as possible: the secret is that Jesus himself is the 'seed corn' of the Kingdom. Like seed he too must die if he is to become 'Bread' to feed all those who are invited to the feast in the Kingdom of God. It's a secret because:

- Seeds are 'secret' by nature. They are like nature's timer delay switches. The fruit is there in essence - but you can't see it yet.
- The message that Jesus, the seed, 'must die' is too uncomfortable to say openly, until the disciples realise that the cross is the road Jesus will travel - and they may



have to travel it with him. In our earlier prayers it seemed as though we might be called to be the 'seed' as well... so what does this mean?

Reading

Have seven people each holding either a placard with a picture or an object to represent one line in each of the following two verses. As their line is read, they make an appropriate action for the words.

Having tried the reading once or twice with a reader, let the whole congregation say it together at speed, perhaps a couple of times. NB If you have kneaded dough at the beginning save a part for using here.

Planting the seeds

Here is the seed going into the ground
That grows into wheat yellow and round
That is threshed by combine harvester power
That is ground between stones to make fine flour
That is mixed into dough with water and yeast
That is cooked into bread for our daily feast
Which reminds us of Christ the body of life.

Here is the seed going into the ground
That grows into grapes red and round
That is squashed in a press to get juice from the flesh
That is poured into vats while it is still fresh
That is mixed with water, sugar and yeast
That is stored in green bottles for a family feast
Which reminds us of Christ the blood of life.

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Gospel reading: Mark 14. 12- 25 Perhaps using two voices, one as narrator, the other to read the 'spoken' parts. While the reading is read the minister moves towards the altar/communion table, and the bread (possibly baked from the dough seen at the beginning of the service) and wine are brought. If you are not having Communion the bread and wine could be shared after the reading.

Otherwise continue as follows:

Prayer Poem of Offering

Heads bowed
Stalks cut,
Ears threshed,
Grain crushed,
White flour.



Head bowed,
Fingers working,
Yeast - flour
Dough rising,
Bread cooked.

We offer you, Father, this bread,
Fruit of the earth
And work of human hands.
Blessed be God for ever.

Heads bowed,
Bread no more.
Christ's Body
Given for all.

Heads bowed,
Daily bread
Held in hand,
Life's strand,
God enfleshed.

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Sentence before Communion (said by all)

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because
there is one bread, we who are many are one body, because we all partake in
the one bread.

Distribution of Communion

*A possible way for communion to be distributed would be to invite people to come up in silence
and 'communicate themselves' from the bread and the wine left on the table/altar.*

*After communion, or to conclude the service, read Mark 14.26-28, with a narrator and a voice for
Jesus. After the reading the person representing Jesus 'disappears'.*

Final prayer (said by all)

Father, in baptism we die to sin.
rise again to new life,
and find our true place in your living body.
Send us out sealed in Christ's blood
of the new covenant,
to bring healing and reconciliation
to this wounded world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.



Words of dismissal

Leader: Jesus is walking ahead of us up to Jerusalem again

People: And those who follow are afraid

or

And though we are afraid we follow him.

Give people some seeds to take home and plant - choose seeds that are appropriate to plant at this season.

In keeping with Mark's Gospel encourage people to leave the church quickly!

