



**“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34**

# Jesus, the Suffering Servant (Part 1)

**T**he four gospels are so important for our Christian faith that it is hard to imagine the church without them. Yet, there was a time when the church existed without these sacred writings. The earthly ministry of Jesus ended in about A.D. 30, and the Gospel According to Mark was probably written in the late 60's. Throughout those decades, the first generation of Christians had the living witness of those who had known Jesus. His sayings and teachings, stories of his miracles, his suffering, death, and resurrection were all told and retold and passed on within the community of disciples.

Before the gospels were written, the church was evangelizing, teaching, baptizing, celebrating Eucharist, serving the poor, and living the teachings of Jesus. Out of this lived experience as the community of Jesus' disciples, the gospels came to be written. The good news of Jesus formed the community of disciples, and this community of disciples formed the written gospels.

We can distinguish three stages in gospel formation. The first stage is the historical life and ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection. This is the good news, the original living gospel. The second stage is the preaching of the apostles. As the Holy Spirit filled their lives, they were enabled to remember the life of Jesus and also to understand its meaning for themselves and others.

This Spirit gave them a burning desire to spread the message of Jesus as the good news of salvation for all. It led them to travel throughout the known world preaching and teaching what they had received. The final stage of formation is the writing of the evangelists. The gospel writers pulled together the collected memories about Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, and the interpretation and understanding of the church into four inspired works.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, each writer expressed the good news of Jesus in his own way. Each gospel was written in a different place in the ancient world, at a different time during the first century, and within the context of different cultures with diverse questions and needs. Each of the four gospels gives us a unique portrait of Jesus to enrich our understanding.

Two main factors led to the need for written gospels. First, the church was rapidly expanding throughout the Roman Empire. This expansion created the need to have some concrete and unchanging expression of the good news of Jesus to bring to each community. Second, the apostles were beginning to die, and the church no longer had their eye-witness testimony of the life of Jesus. The need to pull together the traditions of Jesus' words and deeds into a full picture of his ministry led the authors to create the written gospels.

The best evidence indicates that Mark was the first to shape the Christian message into this unique literary work called a gospel. In fact, Mark is the only New Testament book which calls itself a gospel: "The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The later gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark's gospel as their major source.

When Mark began to write the gospel, the church had already expanded throughout the empire and even to the city of Rome. The best theory about the origins of this gospel places the evangelist in Rome during the reign of Nero (A.D. 54–68). The beauty of that imperial city at the height of its power, its bright marble buildings and its forum filled with nobles and their servants, disguised the terrible suffering of its Christian community. Early sources credit Peter as the source of much of Mark's information and understanding. Mark is known as the "interpreter" or "translator" (*hermeneutes* in Greek) of Peter. When the city of Rome burned in A.D. 64, Nero blamed the Christians and unleashed a great persecution. Both Peter and Paul, along with hundreds of other Christians, died as martyrs during that time. Mark wrote his gospel in this atmosphere of persecution and great suffering, and perhaps it was Peter's death in Rome that spurred Mark to complete his gospel.

## Reflection and discussion

- In what sense can we say that Mark's gospel began the third stage in gospel formation?

- What were some of the circumstances that provoked Mark to write this gospel?

## A Gospel in a Time of Crisis

The particular portrait of Jesus formed by Mark's gospel responds to the unique situation and challenging questions of the Christian community in which the evangelist wrote. Who is Jesus? Why is he so powerfully attractive and so violently opposed? Why should I continue to follow him? If he has such power, why does he allow us to suffer? How do I follow him in such difficult situations? These were the kinds of questions asked by this persecuted community. These were the questions in Mark's mind as he remembered the deeds of Jesus and drew together his life to hand it on to others. Mark selected the particular parts of the tradition about Jesus that would help the church understand him better and follow him more faithfully.

Mark has written a fast-paced gospel filled with the actions of Jesus. It is the shortest of all the gospels and seems to be designed to create a sense of urgency. Jesus moves somewhat breathlessly from place to place, taking the lead and determining the direction of the narrative. Mark's gospel lacks many of the lengthy teachings that fill the other gospels. Whether or not Mark knew