

Mark was, in the opinion of most biblical scholars the first evangelist. Despite Matthew being the Gospel which opens the New Testament, Mark was the first writer to see the need for a written account of the ministry of Jesus culminating in his passion and death. Matthew and Luke followed the lead of Mark, thinking that they could improve on his work, but using his account as a template, a basic structure, which they each adapted, added to or occasionally omitted from, to produce what was in their view a better proclamation of the Lord Jesus to the faithful who follow him.

Each Gospel has its fans and its critics, Undoubtedly each has its own genius. Gentle Luke has softened Mark's harsh approach to the disciples, and has emphasised the reconciliation and healing Jesus brought as he underwent his passion and death. Both Luke and Matthew added accounts of Jesus' birth, and stories of Jesus appearances after his Resurrection.

The simple fact that Matthew and Luke used a version of Mark has given these three Gospels the name of the Synoptic Gospels - syn = with or alongside, and optic – to do with seeing. They can be written out in parallel columns and each episode can be read across to see what changes Matthew and Luke have made to their source. This gives us an idea of what they wanted to tell us about Jesus' life and work which varies the emphasis of Mark. [See chart at end of this homily]

What changes, what 'improvements', does Luke make to the account of Jesus' Transfiguration which he found in Mark?

First of all there is a change in the time setting for this event. In Mark we read, “after six days” but in Luke we hear, “Now about eight days after these sayings...”. In neither Gospel is there a clear chronology of events so these timings are meaningless, except for having some symbolic significance. It is difficult to guess what Mark's 'six days' might signify; but Luke's 'eight days' might be a reference to Jesus Resurrection which happened 'on the eighth day' – Sunday, the first day of the week being both the first day and the eighth day. If so then Luke has, in my view, rightly interpreted Mark's unspoken understanding of the Transfiguration as an out of place Resurrection story.

Luke tells us what Moses and Elijah were speaking about. A topic on which Mark is silent. They are speaking, literally, of his 'Exodus' which he is to accomplish in Jerusalem. There is a word heavy with meaning. And later in this chapter of Luke Jesus will 'set his face towards Jerusalem' and the theme of journeying will dominate the following account until Jesus arrives at Journey's End, the only place suitable for a prophet to die.

The Exodus was, of course, the journey of the people through the wilderness from slavery and oppression in Egypt to the Promised Land. Elijah and Moses, look

forward to the new liberation Jesus will achieve by his death in the Holy City.

Peter and his companions are desperately trying to stay awake, a detail not mentioned by Mark but which anticipates another slumber which the disciples will fall into, when Jesus has reached his destination. On the Mount of Olives, at a certain place, before he is arrested, Jesus will pray that the cup pass him by. The disciples cannot on this occasion stay awake, despite Jesus instruction to do so.

On the mountain in Galilee, after Jesus has been praying, his appearance changes, and his garments glow brilliant white. Outside Jerusalem, as he prays, his appearance changes and his sweat drips off him like great drops of blood.

Another change Luke makes to his source is in the words of the Father from the cloud. "This is my son the beloved", are the words heard at Jesus' baptism in both Mark and Luke, but here at the Transfiguration, Luke reports the words as "This is my son, the Chosen One". As we saw last week, 'the beloved son' reminds us of the Isaac story. 'The chosen one', is a reference to the suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks in a series of poems which we listen to in Holy Week. In Isaiah 42 we read, "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights"... and a few lines later, "He does not cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in the streets... Faithfully he brings true justice; he will neither waver nor be crushed." And a few lines later on we are listening to a similar text with which Jesus, in Luke, opens his ministry in Nazareth, his home town, when he announces that he has come to open the eyes of the blind, free captives from prison...".

So Luke looked at Mark's Transfiguration story and was puzzled. What was this resurrection-type tale doing here in the middle of the Gospel. He improved, in his eyes, by making the Resurrection aspect more clear with reference to 'the eighth day'; he emphasised Jesus' purpose as coming to suffer and die and so bring a new beginning. He does this by the mention of 'Exodus' and Jesus as the 'Chosen One', one whose sufferings have an atoning, a reconciling purpose. And the exhausted disciples point us to another change in Jesus' appearance but this time an appalling one as he prepares himself for the encounter with Satan which has begun.

At the end of the Temptations-story we heard that Satan left him to return 'at the appointed time'. When Jesus is in anguish in prayer on the Mount of Olives that appointed time has arrived. We were told before the supper that Satan entered Judas. At the end of the temptations in Mark angels came and ministered to Jesus. Luke had no angels there but he has one as Jesus prays. The angel comes to get Jesus ready for the combat ahead. The sweat, far from being a sign of anguish, is a sign of preparedness. Now he is ready. The Exodus is going to be accomplished. Jesus' Transfiguration to eternal glory has begun.

### Matthew 17:1-8

**1** Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. **2** And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. **3** And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. **4** Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **5** While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” **6** When the disciples heard *this*, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. **7** And Jesus came to *them* and touched them and said, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” **8** And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.

### Mark 9:2-8

**2** Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; **3** and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. **4** Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. **5** Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **6** For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. **7** Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!” **8** All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.

### Luke 9:28-36

**28** Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. **29** And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing *became* white *and* gleaming. **30** And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, **31** who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. **32** Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. **33** And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not realizing what he was saying. **34** While he was saying this, a cloud formed and *began* to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. **35** Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” **36** And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.