

T. Austin-Sparks:

Lord, Thou art the only Heavenly Teacher; none teacheth, Lord, like Thee. We cannot teach unless Thou teach us. We are here this morning as Thy disciples, those who are to be taught by Thee, take Thy Word and open it to us. Open our ears to hear, give us understanding, give us obedient hearts, lead us in Thy truth, Holy Spirit, do the work which Thou hast come to do. Our Lord Jesus said that when You would come, You would guide us into all truth. Do that work here today that the Lord Jesus may be satisfied. We ask it in His Name. Amen.

We have said that the whole of the New Testament is occupied with one thing in three parts - the mission, the meaning and the message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and that every one of the twenty-seven parts of the New Testament contains some particular aspect of those three things. We went on to see how that is true in the Gospel by Matthew, and now we are going to see this in the Gospel by Mark.

Now I am going to ask you to look at quite a number of passages:

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

Those are the first words in this Gospel. Now we turn to the last words, in chapter 16:20:

"And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed."

"And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John whose surname was Mark" (Acts 12:12).

"And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministration, taking with them John whose surname was Mark" (Acts 12:25).

"And when they were at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John as their attendant" (Acts 13:5).

"Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:13).

"And after some days Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us return now and visit the brethren in every city wherein we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they fare. And Barnabas was minded to take with them John also, who was called Mark" (Acts 15:37-38).

"Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is useful to me for ministering" (2 Timothy 4:11).

"She that is in Babylon, elect together with you, saluteth you: and so doth Mark my son" (1 Peter 5:13).

WHO WAS MARK?

Those passages give the life story of Mark and we hardly need to take time to ask: Who was Mark? His full name was John Mark, and he was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10, R.V.). Now I want you to remember these details that I am giving you, for there is a significance bound up with very one of them. He was a cousin of Barnabas, and we shall have more to say about that presently. We know nothing about his father, but we do know that his mother owned the upper room in Jerusalem, and there was a lot of history bound up with that upper room! It was probably the room in which the Lord had the Last Supper before He died. John Mark knew all about that! He certainly knew all that happened in Jerusalem, at least during the last week of our Lord's life. There was a Christian man who lived in the first half of the second century, whose name was Papias, and he wrote this: "Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, as many as he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord." There is a very great deal to be said about that, as we shall see in a minute.

At that point, then, we want to recognize a very important principle. If you forget everything else, remember this. We are speaking about the mission, the meaning and the message of Jesus Christ, and we must recognize that those three things were written in the lives of the Lord's servants. Mark did not only write the history: he WAS

that history. The history of Jesus Christ was very largely written in the experience of Mark, and that is what we are going to see.

Let us recognize that when the Lord gets hold of our lives, He does not just make us talkers about Him, nor does He just make us writers of books about Him. He writes HIMSELF in our experience and such are the only true teachers and preachers. I know that I say a very responsible thing when I say that, but it is essential that when we speak or write about the Lord Jesus people see Him behind our words. That is why the Lord Jesus makes spiritual history in our experience. When we come to this man, John Mark, we have to see the man behind his Gospel, and that is why we read all those passages about his history.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL BY MARK

Let us begin by looking at the nature of his Gospel. Here we come upon a young man in a big hurry! He is very eager to get things done. He has no time for chronology, and times and places do not matter very much with him. His whole disposition is: let us get on with the work! This young man has only three words in his vocabulary. You read the Gospel and you will find them: 'straightway!' Have you noticed how often Mark uses that word? 'Straightway... and straightway...', and he goes on like that. The second word is 'immediately', and the third is 'forthwith'. Thirteen chapters begin with the word 'and'. You see, this young man is getting on with it.

John Mark does not give us any genealogy, nor introduction, but he begins at once: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ". It is the shortest of all the Gospels, but he puts into a short space a very great deal of material. He gives us just enough facts for action, so much so, that scholars believe that Matthew and Luke built their Gospels on Mark. And you notice the last words in his Gospel: "They went forth, and preached". This young man is getting on with the work! His idea is to get things done as quickly as possible.

That is our foundation. Now we begin on the message, which comes out of several things. Firstly, his title: "they had John as their minister", or, in other words, "as their attendant". They had John Mark to assist them in the work; he was a servant to the ministry. Just remember that as we go on.

JOHN MARK ON TRIAL

Then as to his history. The first thing that we have about John Mark's history is that he was put on trial. He was given an opportunity - "Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem... taking with them John whose surname was Mark". That provided this young man with a great opportunity. He was on probation. He had the opportunity of proving himself, and proving himself in difficulty.

JOHN MARK A FAILURE

Secondly, John Mark was a failure. He could not stand up to the situation, so he went home. That nice upper room in Jerusalem was much more comfortable than this life with the apostles! So Luke says that "John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem". John Mark a failure.

Do any of you here feel that you have been a failure? Well, the story does not finish there. We come to the third doing, which is

JOHN MARK RECOVERED

Why the failure? We have said that things were too difficult, but why were they too difficult? It would seem that John Mark's beginning in the work was without an adequate foundation. How did it come about that John Mark ever went with Barnabas and Paul? Do you notice the order in which I put the names? Barnabas and Paul! That order will be changed presently... but did John Mark go on a basis of family interest? Dear old Uncle Barnabas! And dear old Uncle Barnabas did want to give his dear young cousin an opportunity and it was out of family sentimentality that he wanted Mark to go with them.

Do you think that I am reading something into this? It was this very personal relationship which resulted in the separation of Barnabas and Paul. John Mark went into the work on someone else's experience and not on his own. I do want you to get the picture right! We know that Barnabas was a very loving man. He had a large heart. You remember the story of Barnabas! Paul, on one occasion said: "Even Barnabas was carried away" (Galatians 2:13) - 'You wouldn't think that Barnabas would ever be carried away!' And John Mark was captivated by this large-hearted, sentimental uncle. He was captivated by some strong, loving personality, and he was not

captivated by Jesus Christ. His foundation was some man and not the Lord, and anything like that is bound to break down sooner or later. Do you remember what we said about Matthew? His message is the absolute foundation of Christianity, because it is the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, and that was the weakness in the life of John Mark. Uncle Barnabas was lord! And the very best men are not good enough to go through this battle.

Well, the point is this: the absolute necessity for a personal experience of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a very dangerous thing to put a young man in responsibility if he has not got that experience! That is the ground of proving ourselves. Policy must never take the place of principle. Diplomacy says: 'Give the young man a chance', but principle says: 'Let only approved people be put into responsibility.'

Well, we see that Mark broke down on natural grounds, but he came to victory when he came under the mastery of the Lord Jesus. He could never have written this Gospel if that were not true. All his enthusiasm in this Gospel is to speak about the glory of the Lord Jesus, and nowhere do you find him speaking about what a wonderful uncle he had. It is always about what a wonderful Lord he had, and that meant a great change. We began with him as an attendant, and we end with him as a partner. He is not now just a busy servant, he is now a partner in the firm. He has passed from being unprofitable to being "profitable" - and that is the word that the great apostle Paul used about John Mark in the end: "Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11, A.V.). What a big change! Do you want just to be an attendant, or do you want to be a partner in the gospel? One who is just doing a lot of things, or one who is carrying heavy responsibility? Well, we are getting nearer to the message.

THE PLACE WHICH THE GOSPEL BY MARK OCCUPIES

The next thing is the place which Mark's Gospel occupies, and this again is a very significant thing. You know that Mark's Gospel was the first Gospel to be written. It was written before Matthew, before Luke and before John. Why then was it not given the first place? This is not natural at all. Seeing that it was the first Gospel to be written, surely it ought to have the first place! But the Holy Spirit knew what He was doing. He never works on natural lines, but on spiritual lines, and that is a different order from man's way of doing things.

So Mark has second place, and, oh! HERE is the message! All service and activity must come out of authority and submission. Matthew first: the authority of Jesus Christ and His absolute Lordship. Mark second: all service comes out of submission to the Lord Jesus. All action must follow the mastery of Jesus Christ. What is the chief characteristic of a true servant of the Lord? It is meekness. That is true of the Lord Jesus. Do you remember John 13, when He laid aside His robe girded Himself with a towel, the symbol of the bondsman, poured water into a basin, and then He - the Lord of glory, through Whom and by Whom all things were created - now divested of everything, was on His knees, washing the feet of sinful men! He was right when He said: "I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29)! Was there ever one who served the Lord more fully?

We have said that Mark was very closely connected with Peter in his writing, and I wonder if you remember the spiritual connection between these two? The Lord Jesus said something to Peter that he never forgot, and when he was about to be executed he said: "even as our Lord Jesus Christ signified unto me" (2 Peter 1:14). When and where did the Lord signify that to Peter? What was it that the Lord showed him? 'Simon, when you were young you girded yourself and went wheresoever you wanted to go. You took your life into your own hands and did as you liked. When you are old another will gird you and carry you where you would not go' (John 21:18). There you have the change between the old Simon and Peter in the end. We know that the whole history of Peter, when the Lord was here was of one who was wanting to have his own way all the time. Sometimes he would even tell the Lord that He was wrong! In other words he said: 'Lord, You are wrong in that! Lord, You don't know what You are saying!' This man must have a very deep history, for the government must be taken out of his hands and put into other hands. From being a dictator he must be a bondsman, and we know the story of how that happened: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not: and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, stablish thy brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). True service comes out of submission.

So both Peter and Mark embody the principle of subjection to the Lordship of Christ. I like that little fragment which we read in Peter's Letter. It is a very tender reference to John Mark: "She that is in Babylon... saluteth you: and so doth Mark my son". There is a lot of history in that!

Well, now I am going to say a thing which is very difficult to say. You may not all understand it, but I will try to make it simple. It is always a very perilous thing to sublimate the soul. Now you do not understand that, but let me explain. It is possible to put soulish emotion in the place of spiritual feeling and soulish emotion is just

sentimentality. It is that kind of emotion which people call love: 'Oh, my dear cousin John Mark, I do want you to come with me into the Lord's work! You know I love you very much, and I am quite sure that your dear mother in Jerusalem would like you to be a minister. Come along, Mark, and I will introduce you to Paul and get him to agree to your coming.' Of course, that is all very lovely, but it is not spirituality. That is false spirituality, what I have called the sublimation of the soul. It is mistaking the soul for the spirit, and in that there is no deep brokenness of soul. Do you see what I mean?

Well, what does all this have to do with the mission, the meaning and the message of Jesus Christ? John Mark has shown us in his Gospel how very active the Lord Jesus was, how tireless He was in doing the will of His Father. There were times when they had no opportunity even for taking their food. Mark says: 'Straightway... immediately... forthwith... they went forth' and that is the story of Jesus. No, there is no laziness about the Lord Jesus! Paul's words were very fully fulfilled in His case: "Always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Jesus was wholly committed to the work of His Father, but - and it is a big 'but' - there was no one on this earth ever who was more in subjection to the will of His Father. Two words sum up the work of the Lord Jesus: submission and dependence. He said: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day" (John 9:4). Yes, that is true, but He never did one work without first asking His Father if He should do it. For everything that He did, and every place to which He went, He asked the Father's guidance. With us it all seems so necessary, and the situation is so needy, and the soul says: 'You ought to do it', but not with Jesus. Do you remember the three temptations in the wilderness? They all seemed so reasonable and necessary, but never did necessity or reason govern the Lord Jesus. He was joined to heaven by the anointing Spirit. Why should the Son of God need to pray? Because He was dependent upon His Father. For guidance, for what He should do, He always referred to the Father, and for strength to do it He had to live by the Father.

That principle was written in the history of John Mark. It did not mean that either the Lord Jesus or John Mark did less because they were dependent upon the Father. I think they did much more, and they did much better, and their work remains to this day because "whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever" (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

I wonder if you have got the message of John Mark? Let me say to my younger brothers: Be John Marks in the last situation. Be utterly committed to Jesus Christ, and He will make you a very useful partner in the Kingdom.

Lord, with all this that has been said, the one thing that we ask for is an impression. We may not remember all things, but make this deep impression on us - that a life wholly submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ will be a very fruitful life. Make all our hearts Thy throne and reign over us, Lord Jesus. Amen.