

The solemnity of the Patron Saint, Mark the Evangelist (April 25, 2016)
Patriarchal Basilica of St Mark's - Venice
Patriarch's homily Francesco Moraglia

Today, April 25, Venice and the Venetian people are celebrating the feast of their patron saint, whose relics were transported to the city - in a most adventurous way - in the year 828 by two merchants: Buono from Malamocco and Rustico from Torcello.

According to tradition, Mark was the evangelist to the lands of north east Italy, and for that reason he rightly gives his name to the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Basilica and is the patron saint of the Church of Venice and all the Venetian people.

As we know, Mark - besides being our beloved patron saint - is the author of the Gospel that bears his name and thus the inventor of the literary genre called, precisely, "the gospel"; euanghélion simply means good news. We must, therefore, feel a very special gratitude to St Mark.

And I want to stop right here, because of the risk of misplacing - at least in part - the explosive joy of the good news of the Gospel.

When we hear the Gospel message constantly repeated we can end up - if we are not careful - failing to be surprised by its unprecedented newness, innovation and revolutionary Christian proclamation. Pope Francis, not surprisingly, has titled his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, as a strong call to live the good news of the Gospel.

In this regard, it is enough to mention both the beginning and the end of Mark's Gospel in order to quite literally be amazed. The opening words of the Gospel could not possibly have a more disruptive impact in store for us; through them we understand - by listening to them and making them ours - that Christianity is not simply another of the many human varieties of philosophy, ethics or ideology.

On the contrary, the Gospel announces a truth that takes you by surprise no matter who you are, because it presents itself in such a way that you understand that it is not up to you to choose but simply to accept something that you can only welcome.

The question is simple and stands thus: how could all this have come from a single man and his world? And, again, what about what has been said in the first verse of the Gospel: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (Mk 1,1)?

Then we find the same message when we reach the culminating event of the Lord's earthly life, his death. The story of Jesus is almost at an end, and according to the ancient Hebrew and pagan customs this was the most degrading and shameful death: crucifixion in the ancient world (Hebrew and pagan Roman), was the most infamous death, for criminals and slaves who had tried to run away.

Precisely for this reason it is even more shocking and, in human terms, out of place, when the Roman soldier, having seen him breathe his last, says, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39).

And so Mark in his Gospel commences the task of announcing that God freely calls out to humanity and, indeed, stimulates both our minds and our hearts.

The Gospel accounts are born precisely from this need: obedience to Christ who has sent them out to spread the word. In writing the story of Jesus they are concerned not to stray from the facts of the different events which they have either witnessed or heard told by those who were present.

The evangelist Mark did not invent the facts and the discourses of Jesus. In fact, a widespread oral and written tradition already existed; such as, for example, episodes of the life of Jesus and some of his words (logia); a special place was reserved for the long story of the Passion.

Mark, who remained faithful to what he received from the Church, is the inspired founder of the group of books later given the name of Gospel.

The style is simple, immediate. Mark is just like a popular author in his narrative that, here and there expressions that we can see have been specially treasured emerge: look at how in the description of the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida he says, "I see people, because they look like trees walking" (Mk 8:24).

All this, however, does not mean that our evangelist is not a skilful storyteller; he is that above all. Mark's writing expresses solidity and vitality very clearly; the verbs in his sentences are frequently in the present tense, giving vibrancy, rhythm, topicality.

In any case, Mark - within his personal style - has a profound theological vision which reinterprets the life of Jesus through the perspective of Easter. In creating the Gospel genre, Mark tells of his desire and commitment to proclaim Jesus and shows us a road that will become the "norm" for the entire Church.

In this evangelising action Mark also strives to find a language suitable for and understandable by those who did not belong to the Jewish world in which Jesus lived, preached and performed the signs of the Kingdom. This is the first time that the Gospel which, according to the command of Jesus, is to be announced everywhere, at all times and to all men, is adapted for people of different cultures.

This is the great lesson that comes from Mark: proclaiming this self-same Jesus in a context that is not the one in which Jesus lived. The language must both faithfully express the mystery and also be understandable even to those who do not belong to the same world as that from which the Gospel originated.

The world which Mark sees before him - the men and women with whom he wants to enter into dialogue, the communities in which they live - are, for him, true and real opportunities for this new message.

The task that Mark has completed - the Gospel - states very clearly once and for all that in the Church there is room for everyone, and the Church holds out its hand to everyone, to the unbelievers of every age, including our own; and it also teaches us how the humanity of Jesus is the special way of opening ourselves, in faith, to his divinity.

The centurion comes to faith precisely because of the humanity of Christ and, in fact, it is precisely at the moment of death that he exclaims: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39).

Mark, addressing the Gentiles through his Gospel, reaches out to everyone and excludes no one. His message does not discriminate, excludes no-one and wants to include everyone.

Some words of Pope Francis come to mind.

They reiterate - two thousand years later - the choice Mark made through his Gospel. Here are the Holy Father's words: "A renewed proclamation gives (...) new joy to the faithful and fecundity in evangelising ... its centre and its essence remains the same: the God who has revealed His immense love in Christ who died and rose again. He constantly renews his believers so that (...) "they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."(Is 40,31). Christ - continued Pope Francis - is the "eternal gospel" (Rev 14,6), and is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13.8), but his richness and his beauty are inexhaustible. He is forever young and constantly renewed. The Church does not cease to wonder at "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom 11:33) "(Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 11).

We too, today, following the example of Mark the Evangelist, we are called - as the Pope teaches - to speak to other people about the humanity of Jesus Christ. We no longer face the pagan world of the first century, but our own times with their combination of poverty and opportunity, fragility and resources.

All are searching for an authentic and concrete language, a language that is altogether capable of communicating the truth and which does not "reduce" the mystery of God to a human scale; and, which is, at the same time, capable of perceiving modern people with their wounds, expectations, questions - even those which they do not express - so that the Church can reach out to all men and women who are willing to listen.

Such is the word of hope that the disciple of Jesus is called upon to proclaim, but it must move beyond the human and - it should be stressed - must also overcome it, transforming it to become that which humanity has within itself and which is the image and likeness of God.

Mark the Evangelist - presenting Jesus as a concrete, real and susceptible man who does not look for fame and notoriety but who wishes to establish a genuine human relationship with us all - evangelises us and leads to a faith which begins with the very real humanity of Christ.

Mark in his Gospel presents Jesus as the "beloved Son" (cfr. Mk 1:11), and as "the Christ" (Mark 8:29), but it is in the very human act of dying that the emergence of faith is captured, because that is when the centurion exclaims: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39).

St. Mark the Evangelist - protector of the Church of Venice and the Venetian people - also leads us today to rediscover the true face of Jesus, the Saviour of every man and of all men.