

St. Mark:

From Mission to Martyrdom

Holiness Pope Tawadros II

Eminences, Graces, Ladies, and Gentlemen.

Let me begin from the beginning of his gospel:

**“Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.”**

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.’ ” (Mark 1: 2 – 3)**

This is how St. Mark begins his gospel. And this is how we received the good news that he brought to us about Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. By “we”, I mean Christians not only in Egypt, but in all Africa as well. As has John the Baptist’s, St. Mark’s voice cried in the wilderness of the hearts of our ancestors, telling them, and also telling us,

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.’ ” (Mark 1: 3)**

1) Self-developing personality

It is absolutely challenging to approach the personality of St. Mark, a great saint, apostle, missionary, evangelist, and martyr; a personality that is so rich and full of accomplishments though martyred in his sixties.

Who was St. Mark before his evangelical mission began? Was he that **“certain young man [who] followed Him [Jesus], having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And [when] the young men laid hold of him, he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked.” (Mark 14: 51 – 2)?** Was he the one who left Paul and Barnabas in Perga to go to Jerusalem causing a conflict between his uncle Barnabas and Paul?

Or was he the one about whom Paul wrote to Timothy saying: **“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4: 11)?** Or the one whom Peter has called **“My son Mark” (1 Peter 5: 13)?**

Mark has been all the aforementioned Biblical texts; a young man who grew up in a well off family and had good education, therefore was not to be arrested but ran almost naked. He also was the one who left Paul and Barnabas. Yet he was a self- developing man, willing to learn, and to develop, a missionary who would grow in the knowledge of His Savior and work more in His vineyard. That is how Mark became useful not only to Paul but to all the countries he preached, and churches he built, ours is one of them. And that is how he was no more the one who runs away, but rather the apostle who faces all kinds of danger to complete his evangelism.

This great development is stamped by the symbol of St. Mark; The Lion!! Yes the lion in Revelation 4 and the lion with wings that Venice adopts as the city symbol refer to St. Mark our first Patriarch in the Coptic Church. In two thousand years, all the popes of Alexandria, successors to the See of St Mark, had statues of lions surrounding their chair even inside the church to show the love and pride we have for our great saint.

2) A fisherman

Mark had a developing personality and also a fisherman talent. Although he was not a fisherman as his older relative Peter, he was one of the 70 apostles called by Jesus. Therefore, his mission was to be a fisherman; he followed Jesus to become a fisher of men as mentioned in **(Matthew 4: 19)**.

In the book, ***The History of the Church***, by Father Mennassa Youhanna, you can read how Mark worked as a fisher of people when he met Inianus in Alexandria. Father Mennassa wrote that St Mark was walking for long in Alexandria watching the streets and observing people until his shoe was torn. He went to a shoemaker, Inianus and when he attempted to fix the shoe, he cut his hand badly. This made Inianus cry saying (o énas theós) which means O the one god. Immediately, Mark used the words to begin a conversation about who was the one god, after healing the hand of Inianus of course. Similar to Paul who talked to the Athenians in the Aereopagus about the unknown god to fish for souls, St. Mark began from the cry of (the one god) and had his first Egyptian Christian family of the shoemaker who became a pious Christian and the first to be ordained by St. Mark.

In his famous book about St Mark, ***The African Memory of Mark***, Thomas C Oden verified the account of the meeting of Mark and Inianus; but more importantly, Oden described the evangelism of Mark saying,

“Geographically he covered more of the earth than Paul, witnessing on all three known continents.” (44)

3) A man with a vision

Mark was a self-developing person, a fisherman in his evangelical mission, and also a man of vision. His mission had a very ambitious vision. This is not history but a factual present that the church in Egypt lives daily, thanks to the vision of St. Mark.

1. The school of Alexandria

He had the vision of a teacher. St. Mark was the only Apostle who established a Christian University, the first in the world, The School of Alexandria. Seeing that Alexandria is a city of philosophy and science, and that both are turning people away from God, he foresaw that ideas must be beaten by ideas, and that a Christian School is the way of a wise fisherman to draw the attention of learned Alexandrians. It worked successfully, and he was very much envied for that success.

The School of Alexandria, though was stopped for centuries, came back powerfully to enlighten the Coptic congregation with theological studies. It has always been and is still a spiritual university of which many popes of Alexandria were deans, and from which many more have graduated.

Oden says, “Mark’s life would end in the most populous city of Africa: Alexandria on the coast of the Nile delta. Out of this city, the most influential intellectual center of the whole Mediterranean world, came the first Christian school. It was a catechetical school, designed to communicate the gospel to the world. Its distinctive learning process, from apostolic texts and in dialogue with culture, was born in Africa.” (*The African Memory of Mark*, 22- 23)

2. Gospel of St. Mark

He had the vision of a writer. St. Mark did not only establish the first Theological University, but also wrote the first gospel. Most historians believe that he wrote his gospel before St. Luke wrote his. They were then followed by St. Matthew’s, then St. John’s. He had a vision of a missionary writer who looked forward to generations and generations of believers and well-educated Christians, who would prefer to read the word of God and read the good news.

When he wrote his gospel – according to St. John Chrysostom - in Egypt, St. Mark thought of world Christianity rather than Coptic Christianity. A vision with heavenly wings led the Evangelist to cry in the wilderness with the written word, short but deep, and full of miracles that tell the world about the Messiah. The writer Mark wrote a narrative with detailed description but was able to make it short. His frequently repeated word “immediately” shows all. And his message as is well-known was **“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10: 45)**

3. Liturgy and establishing a church

He had the vision of a worshipper. He also foresaw that prayers need to be formed so that the church community can worship God together. He also ordained priests and deacons with Inianus the Patriarch so that they can keep the liturgy – and they did – to future generations. Consequently, the very first liturgical prayers that St. Mark has formed compose the core of the Holy mass we as Copts pray until now. Though he did not write it, St. Mark’s holy mass was written by St Athanasius the Apostolic, Pope no. 20 of Alexandria, and was rewritten with added litanies by St. Cyril the Great, the 24th Pope of Alexandria.

When St. Mark prayed the consecration of sacraments, he described Jesus first Eucharist, saying, **“He took bread into His holy hands, which are without spot or blemish, blessed, and life-giving. He looked up toward heaven to You, O God, who are His Father and Master of everyone. And when He had given thanks, He blessed it, and sanctified it.”** Seeing Jesus looking up toward heaven in the upper room of his mother’s and his house, Mark was the one who described the scene in details. None of the evangelists mentioned that Jesus “looked up”. It is noteworthy to mention that the Holy Communion has been taken in Egypt as was the very first Passover which was also held in Egypt before the exodus.

I can imagine St Mark powerfully praying, **“The worship of idols, utterly uproot from the world. Satan and all his evil powers, trample and humiliate under our feet speedily.”** And **“Arise, O Lord God, let all Your enemies be scattered, and let all who hate Your holy name flee before Your face.”** Those prayers, we still pray in the 21st century with faith and understanding.

4. Monasticism

He had the vision of an ascetic apostle. St. Mark led a life of early monasticism. Like Paul, he did not have a wife or family. Nor was it mentioned that he had

brothers or sisters whom we know of. His life was completely devoted to his sacred mission. Abandoning comfort and riches, seeking evangelism everywhere he could go to, and teaching by example how a true ascetic Christian life is like, Mark was the early inspiration of Monasticism that began in Egypt through St. Anthony the Great in the 4th century.

The words of the Gospel of St. Mark were read in the church when Anthony was attentively listening. **“Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.” (Mark 10: 21)** Anthony received the words as a personal message to him, sold all he had and followed Jesus. St. Mark’s life and words about Jesus outlived him to flourish throughout the history of the Coptic Church monasteries and even crossed the seas to Europe.

We owe St. Mark a lot.

5. Martyrdom

He had the vision of a martyr. The key word “immediately” describes the vision he had of what he should quickly complete before he is martyred. St. Mark worked hard and fast; established the church in Egypt, ordained Inianus, three priests and seven deacons, established The School of Alexandria, wrote his gospel, and taught the church to pray his liturgy in a few years. He also went to establish the churches of the pentapolis which are still part of the See of St Mark until now. Our Libya churches have recently been closed because of the troubles there. All that was completed quickly before he was martyred in Alexandria during the Resurrection celebrations.

Oden says, “Out of Mark’s life and death came an enduring gift to all early Christians: the emergence of African Christianity.” (***The African Memory of Mark*** 23) The consecration of the streets of Alexandria with his holy blood has been manifested in our Coptic Orthodox Church through ages of martyrs. Until the very recent years, the legacy of martyrdom that St. Mark has established in the church has been and is alive. In St. Mark’s homeland Libya, 21 were slaughtered in the name of Christ keeping the example of all our ancestors and our beloved evangelist St. Mark. Proving to the whole world that it was not history, nor memory, but a faith lived daily on this holy land that Christ himself has visited.

How do we see St Mark and all those who gave their bodies to testify faith? We see them through the Biblical text:

Those **“who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. ...**

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy.” (Hebrews 11: 33 - 38)

To conclude, from mission to martyrdom, St Mark has been like his master. His name Mark which means a heavy hammer is considered a sign because his preaching hammered and destroyed the idols of Egypt just as the visit of Jesus Christ to Egypt as a child had destroyed the idols half a century before. His symbol, the lion taken from Revelation reminds us of **“Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David”** Our Lord Jesus Christ in the same book (5: 5). St. Mark introduced Jesus to all the lands he visited with his power, search for souls, teaching, praying, pious life, and martyrdom.

May his prayers keep us, and his example enlightens the way for us.

I'm very grateful to His Holiness Pope Tawadros for giving me this opportunity to tour the life, mission, and martyrdom of his predecessor St. Mark and enjoy getting closer to our great evangelist. Thank you Your Holiness. In Arabic we say (خير خلف لخير سلف) which is “The best ancestor to the best predecessor.”

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